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MONARCHS OF *Murder*

An Exciting Mystery Novel
By C. K. M. SCANLON

DEATH IS A VAMPIRE
A Gripping Novelet
By ROBERT BLOCH

BEST ACTION
DETECTIVE STORIES

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By C. K. M. SCANLON

Sabotage and Death Stalk Grimly as Rex Parker, Intrepid Reporter-Sleuth, Enters a Maze of Deep Mystery to Pierce a Crime Secret When Greed-Mad Killers Conspire to Make a Fiendish Coup! - - - - - 11

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See THE LINE-UP on Page 6 and the Special Announcement on Page 61 for Thrilling News of Our Change of Policy Starting Next Issue!

THRILLING MYSTERY, published quarterly by Better Publications, Inc., at 11 East 39th St., New York 18, N. Y. Subscription (12 issues) \$1.20; single copies, \$1.00. Foreign postage extra. Entered as second-class matter July 12, 1935, at the Post Office at New York, N. Y., under the Act of March 3, 1879. Copyright, 1944, by Better Publications, Inc. Manuscripts will not be returned unless accompanied by self-addressed, stamped envelopes, and are submitted at the author's risk. Names of all characters used in stories and semi-fiction articles are fictitious. If the name of any living person or existing institution is used it is a coincidence. In corresponding with this publication please include your postal zone number, if any. September, 1944, issue

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The LINE-UP

A DEPARTMENT WHERE READERS
AND THE EDITOR MEET



AFTER careful consideration of the wants of its readers, **THRILLING MYSTERY** is about to embark upon a complete change of policy. Beginning with our next issue, the leading feature of this magazine will be a complete \$2.50 mystery novel selected for thrills, action and suspense from the cream of the crop of best-selling American crime fiction!

We have never stopped trying to make **THRILLING MYSTERY** the finest detective-story magazine in the world. Our readers have shown their appreciation by purchasing more and more copies every time we hit the newsstands.

In return for such splendid support, we are reaching for the stars—the brightest stars among the galaxy of great authors now writing mystery stories!

A Jury of Critics

Hardly a day passes without one to a dozen new detective novels finding their way into print. Keeping up with this endless river of books is no small job in itself. So that none shall be allowed to escape unread and that only the finest of them shall be offered to our readers, we have set up a special jury of veteran critics to study and pass on them.

Almost all of these hundreds of books are good. They have to be, or publishers would hardly risk money and precious paper printing them. It is from work of this already proven quality that we shall hereafter pick our featured novels—novels that represent the best work of a rising generation of mystery writers who are challenging and, in many cases, bettering the masterpieces of Stoker, Conan Doyle, Poe and de Maupassant.

The craft of terror did not die with these old favorites—on the contrary, they were pioneers of a school of writing that has since been broadened and improved to reach an ever-expanding public. But the ablest of their successors have heretofore reached markets far too costly for the pocketbooks of many of the most avid mystery story fans.

Our First Selection

We are about to change all that—by presenting the finest mystery stories now being written for a mere fraction of their previous cost. Complete in its full 65,000-word length, we bring you next issue the latest and most

exciting novel by Dorothy B. Hughes, a mystery as taut and deadly and baffling as ever saw print.

Miss Hughes is no newcomer to mystery fans. Her brilliantly conceived tales of terror, "The So Blue Marble" and "The Fallen Sparrow" were real threats to the coastal blackout during the submarine scare, when thousands of her readers found themselves too afraid of darkness to turn out their lights.

But her newest novel is far and away her best. We are therefore more than proud to launch our thrilling new policy with—

THE DELICATE APE

By Dorothy B. Hughes

Walking uptown from the Pennsylvania Station, Piers Hunt was a man alone in a New York that he had not visited in a dozen years. He was alone with a secret so vital to the world that death threatened him from every side street, every shadowed doorway. He was without friends, for there was no one he could trust. To quote Miss Hughes:

"In the silence, intensified by the muted hum of uptown New York, his footsteps had the sound of doom. They were too even, too studied; he should break the rhythm, perhaps run the last of the way. He did not run. He was afraid to run, a fear perhaps if once he started he would not be able to stop."

Undercover Agent

A Germany held in throttle by the combined police force of the victorious United Nations was astir again with the insane desire to plunge the world into war. Already her surviving leaders had infiltrated high into the counsels of her conquerors, lying and bribing their way toward freedom for a third world war.

Only Piers Hunt, undercover agent of America's great Secretary of Peace Anstruther could stop them. He alone had evidence that could bring the conspiracy toppling about the ears of its creators and save the world from the cataclysm that would destroy it.

For Secretary Anstruther was dead, shot in the back by an assassin near the Lake of the Crocodiles in Africa. Only Hunt knew of his death, knew what he had learned of the cabal against mankind. He was alive only

(Continued on page 8)

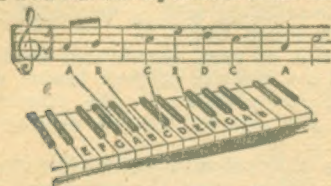
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JOE BONOMO
1841 BROADWAY NEW YORK 23, N.Y.

THE LINE-UP

(Continued from page 6)

because his foes could not be sure that by his death this evidence against them would be suppressed.

A Lone Fight

But to save the world, Piers Hunt had to remain alive to present his facts at the International Peace Conclave five days hence. So he was chased and chivvied from hideout to hideout by enemies he seldom saw or recognized, fighting alone, able to trust in no one. Only the firm knowledge that mankind needed peace gave him the strength to combat the deadly circle that hemmed him in.

"No man wanted war. No man had ever wanted war. But the apes smashed stones down on the heads of those groping through the jungles, watched them turn to rend each other. And the apes scratched themselves with amused fingers, a substitute for thought."

Human Apes

Who were these apes in human guise who sought the destruction of humanity for their own profit? Little by little, as he worked his way through the stifling web of intrigue, Piers Hunt found out.

In the nick of time, by shrewd deduction, he learned the identity of their leader, a man of unassailable position in the counsels of freedom. And he set out to destroy that man!

Never in a novel of mystery has the suspense been tighter spun, the action swifter or the mounting sense of dread more effective. So deftly is *The Delicate Ape* woven that the peril of tomorrow becomes the threat of today. On an ever shifting sea of intrigue, peril and sudden death, the battle is fought tooth and nail right down to the final paragraph.

We are proud to be able to offer you *The Delicate Ape* in the big gala next issue of this magazine. It is a novel that will take its place in that select group of mystery tales that will be read and reread for many years to come. Look forward to it—and to many other grand fiction treats in coming issues.

To signalize our change of policy, the title of the next issue of this magazine will be changed to **THRILLING MYSTERY NOVEL**. There will be sixteen additional pages and the price will be advanced to 15c. The bigger and better **THRILLING MYSTERY NOVEL** will be well worth the slight increase in price.

—THE EDITOR.

P. S. Letters and postcards from readers are invited. Please address them to The Editor, **THRILLING MYSTERY NOVEL**, 11 East 39th Street, New York 16, N. Y. Thank you!

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"I'm sorry
I invented
the pocket!"



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You'll make me very happy if you do.

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WAR BONDS to Have and to Hold



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The blond girl's face was set in grim determination as she pointed the gun at Winnie
(CHAPTER VIII)

MONARCHS OF MURDER

By C. K. M. SCANLON

Sabotage and Death Stalk Grimly as an Intrepid Reporter-Sleuth Enters a Maze of Deep Mystery to Pierce a Crime Secret!

CHAPTER I

Midnight Holocaust

DEEP fog over Manhattan made it a place of eerie shadows and half-muffled sounds. Neon lights had been extinguished by dimout regulations and street lamps burned in the murky night with a hazy, diminished gleam. Traffic crawled and shivering pedestrians sought shelter.

Near the East River a car slipped silently along a vacant street. The three husky, swarthy-faced men in the back seat might have been telephone line-men, judged by

their sheepskin jackets and corduroy breeches. Rolls of wire and tool kits cluttered the rear of the car. An extension ladder hung along the outside.

"Pull over, Tony," muttered the man beside the driver.

Across the sidewalk were the vague outlines of a wire-mesh fence. Farther down, the lights at a gateway were faintly discernible in the swirling mist.

"This'll do all right."

The man who spoke was a well-built man, quietly dressed. His heavy features had an affable look, which was belied by his cruel eyes.

A GRIPPING COMPLETE REX PARKER NOVEL

Behind a Cloud of Camouflage, Greed-Mad

"You've got your orders," he said to those in the back seat. "Everything depends on timing. Whoever gets in your way must be dealt with. A few seconds' delay may make the difference between success and the hot seat for all of you. But if you keep your heads, nothing should go wrong."

"Suppose Sneed don't show up on time?" demanded a man in the rear. "How do we get outa there, Lanning?"

"You'll have to blast your way out." Lanning's tone held a quiet deadliness. "If one of you should be caught, remember that your only hope is to keep your mouth shut. Even if you clear yourself by squealing nothing can save you from the Ferret. Because he has hidden his identity from you, don't underestimate him. Not one of you could hole up deep enough so the organization of the Ferret can't find and destroy you."

LANNING bent to examine his wrist-watch in the faint gleam from the dashboard. The silence was broken only by the eerie bleating of fog whistles from the East River. When the watch indicated precisely 12:47, Lanning turned swiftly.

"Now!" he muttered.

Three men climbed out of the car. The ladder was demounted and, ignoring a sign on the steel-mesh fence which warned: "Keep Away—High Voltage," they leaned the ladder against the charged wires. Heavy insulation of rubber and asbestos at the top of the ladder would withstand the current long enough for their purpose.

The trio all had tools bulging from their pockets, and one had a roll of wire over his shoulder. Quickly the foremost man clambered up the ladder, then jumped expertly into the soft ground beyond the ten-foot fence.

Another started up the ladder.

"Wait!" Lanning called softly.

The man on the ladder climbed down.

A young man came hurrying along with upturned collar. He halted as he spied the ladder, looked from the two men beside the ladder to the car, then back again.

"Say, this is a defense plant," he said. "What are you fellows doing?"

"Current in the fence out of order," came the casual reply. "We're fixing it."

The young man did not notice that one of the men had been edging around behind him. Before he could speak again, or remonstrate, a blackjack flashed up, then descended with crushing force on the young man's head. There was a faint, sickening crunch, and he slumped lifeless to the sidewalk.

The agate-hard eyes of the heavy-set man in the car watched with approval. Lanning waited until the last "repair man" had

mounted the ladder. That man carried a submachine-gun in a case, which he lowered to the men inside the fence of the defense plant, then he jumped.

"Okay," Lanning said to the driver. "Drive slowly toward the gate."

The three inside the fence were walking boldly toward the sentry booth beside the gate, carrying their wire and repair paraphernalia. They passed close to one of the three giant gasoline storage tanks which the yard contained, tanks brimming full of thousands of gallons of precious gasoline awaiting shipment to United States fighting forces abroad.

Workers turned to glance at the three men as they passed, but because of their attire none challenged them.

In the sentry booth stood two uniformed guards, whose duty it was to permit no one except accredited employes through this gate under any pretext. War regulations were rigid and the guards were constantly on the alert.

As the three "repair men" approached, one guard stepped out, rifle in hand.

"Where did you men come from?" he demanded. "Let me see your identification tags."

"Fence maintenance," one of the repair men muttered. "You got a grounded wire. Okay if I use your phone?"

He put down the coil of wire and started to head toward the other guard who sat by the telephone in the booth.

"Just a minute, you!" The guard with the rifle blocked his path. "Nobody told me about any fence repairs. Who let you in here?"

"The fellas before you came on," came the evasive reply. The three repair men continued to close in. "It's all right."

"Want to see the repair order?" Another of the trio pulled a slip of paper from his pocket and handed it to the guard.

The guard hesitated, then took one hand from his rifle to take the paper. The other guard sat with a hand on the alarm system control, warily attentive. Had it not been for the fog he would have seen the automatic appear in the hand of the third workman, who lurked outside the white gleam of lights by the gate. He did not realize that he was a good target, framed in the booth window, until suddenly a muffled concussion sounded and he slumped over lifeless. A silenced gun had been used, and unless someone had happened to be close to it, it was doubtful if the sounds would be recognized as shots.

THE other guard darted a quick glance over his shoulder, dropped the paper and frantically tried to get up his gun.

Criminals Conspire to Make a Fiendish Coup!

But before he could raise the rifle to his shoulder a swarthy figure sprang at him, a thin sliver of steel gleaming dully in an up-raised hand.

The guard's attempted outcry became a whispering gurgle as he fell, a knife in his throat. . . .

In the meantime, at exactly 12:47 a lean, dark-featured man stepped from a drug store several blocks away and into a waiting taxi. He had told the driver to wait while he made a phone call.

Actually he had been watching the second

drive into a defense plant, specially at night," he said. "Not with that box you've got there. You oughta know that."

The man laughed.

"Don't worry, son—it's Government business," he said. "It's replacement parts—rush order. I just phoned the plant. The guards will let you through, all right."

The driver looked dubious, but nosed the taxi in toward the gates. The passenger got out and spoke a few words at the window of the sentry booth. Someone came out and swung the gates open. The man got



REX PARKER

hand of his wrist-watch tick around to the appointed minute.

"Monarch Petroleum Company," he told the driver. "Hurry it up, will you?"

The cab rolled along the misty street, and finally halted near the gates in a wire-mesh fence.

"Here we are, Chief," the driver said cheerfully.

"Drive right in—to the plant office." The passenger spoke with careless authority. "This package I must deliver weighs a ton. Do you expect me to carry it?"

The cabby frowned and shook his head. "Sorry, Mister, but they ain't gonna let me

back into the cab.

"Gosh, you win, sir," said the cabby, as he started the cab toward the small brick office building. "You must be a big shot."

"Stop here," the man said, when they had gone only a short way inside the gates.

The driver stopped and again the man got out.

Pointing toward the middle one of the three storage tanks he told the taximan:

"These parts are to be used on that tank over there. Drive over close to it and wait. I'll stop off at the office and have them send over a couple of men to unload the package. Then you can pick me up at the office."

"Yes, sir."

The cabby drove over toward the storage tank without looking around, so did not see that his passenger did not enter the plant office.

Instead, the man walked rapidly back through the now unguarded gate and entered a car which sped off down the street and vanished in the fog.

Five other men were in the car and three of them wore the clothing of telephone linemen.

Reaching the tank the taxi driver snapped off his motor and waited. Two workmen were nearby, but they did not come to do the unloading.

Actually, these two workmen were more puzzled than suspicious. It was not out of the ordinary for a taxi to bring some official into the grounds during the daytime. But why at night, and over by the storage tanks? Still, the guards would not have passed the cab if it were not all right. The workmen went on about their work.

A FEW minutes passed and the driver became uneasy. If these were replacement parts in that big square package on the back seat, why hadn't they come from some warehouse or factory? Instead, he had picked up his fare in front of a small hotel.

Two men had helped the thin guy lift the box into the taxi.

A chill struck down the cabby's spine.

He stared bug-eyed at the wind-shield wiper.

It was not moving, because he had turned off the motor—but he still heard something ticking!

Swiftly he snapped off his meter. The ticking continued.

"It—it sounds like a bomb!" he muttered.

Wild panic swept over him. He stumbled out of the car and ran blindly toward the gate. He never made it. It was as though a giant hand swept behind him and picked him up. The violence of the concussion ripped the clothing from his back, wrenched at his joints.

He saw part of his rear axle sailing weirdly through the air, knew that something had shattered his cab.

Then the earth-rocking, ear-splitting crash caught up with him and merged into a howling roar. Flames mushroomed out behind him and it was suddenly as bright as noon. Pieces of metal were hailing down out of the sky.

By a freak of chance the explosion blew him straight through the open gates. He lay crumpled in the street, conscious of flames that seemed to reach the sky, of searing blistering heat.

As if in a dream he heard the far-off wails of sirens, running footsteps nearby, a babel of voices—

Then he lapsed into unconsciousness.

CHAPTER II

Call for Rex Parker



BRIGHT morning sunlight gleamed down over the towering buildings of New York City. In the main office of the New York Comet, Winnie Bligh, pretty dark-haired girl reporter, stopped typing to gaze again at the three-column head on the front page of the late edition of the paper that lay on her desk. Given the importance of war news, it read:

OIL BLAST ROCKS MANHATTAN TWENTY-SEVEN DEAD IN EXPLOSION AT MONARCH PETROLEUM PLANT

Winnie sighed and went on typing her own story. Why, she thought discontentedly, did she have to be sent out after club woman interviews when there was a story like that to be covered?

She glanced up as someone neared her desk, and her blue eyes smiled as a tall, long-legged man stopped beside her.

"Rex!" she exclaimed. "Did you cover that Monarch explosion story?"

"Yes, Sweet and Lovely." Rex Parker dropped wearily into a chair, and ran a hand through his thick, dark hair. "Me and about a million other newspaper guys. Nobody appears to know exactly what did happen except that the big gasoline storage tanks blew up."

"Sabotage?" demanded Winnie.

"Could be." The Comet's crack crime reporter shrugged. "One of the guards at the gate had been shot. Fortunately his body had not been damaged by the explosion."

Winnie rose from her desk. She was a tall girl, supple and lovely, who wore her blue-black hair in a smart short bob.

"Rex," she said, "it looks to me as if this is something else right down your alley. And I don't mean just a news story."

Rex Parker nodded somberly. He knew her meaning, for not only had he gained for himself a notable reputation as a crime reporter, but he had become known as one of the best private investigators who ever worked on a murder case. His clear-thinking, hard-fighting way of combatting criminals had gained him the respect and admiration of the police; of Detective-sergeant Dan Gleason of Homicide in particular. It had gained him more than that from this slender, dark-haired girl.

Gleason, in fact, was so glad to work with Parker that he willingly granted to the Comet man police aid which was not available to other newspapermen. Winnie was



As Parker's gun barked, Fenster's automatic dropped from his fingers (CHAPTER VI)

glad to work with him, too—and often did, being assigned as his assistant when the reporter followed a crime trail. She was a valued aid, for she possessed plenty of brains and courage.

Rex Parker's success in clearing up various baffling mysteries had brought him importance in the eyes of both the Law and the lawless. A long list of important people were grateful for his services—and as many criminals would have delighted in reading his obituary.

"I've been up all night," Parker said, with a yawn. "The way I feel now I've had all I want of this case."

Winnie started to speak, but stopped as a freckled-faced, red-headed copy boy sauntered up, grinning at them.

"What is it, Tim?" she asked.

"Three guys waiting to see Parker," said the boy. "Big shots—maybe want him to tell them how to run the Government."

"Go away, Tim," Parker said wearily. "Tell them I've gone on a long vacation, starting yesterday."

"Wait a minute, Tim," ordered Winnie firmly. "Tell those gentlemen that Mr. Parker will see them—at once."

The boy nodded, and went away, grinning impudently at Rex Parker.

MINUTES later, three grim-faced men sat across from Rex Parker in a private office. Alan W. Carridine, President of Monarch Petroleum was speaking. He was an enormous man, six-feet-four, and proportionately broad. Although in his late fifties, a rugged outdoor existence had kept him at the peak of health.

"And so, Mr. Parker," he said after the initial introductions, "the Board of Directors has asked me to appeal to you for assistance. The loss to our company has been staggering—and even more important is the loss to the nation's war effort."

"I can readily understand that, Mr. Carridine," said Parker. "But in what way do you feel that I can help you?"

"We know of your excellent work as a private investigator, Mr. Parker. Both the F. B. I. and the New York police have every available man at work on last night's explosion, but we would like to have you working for us also. There are tremendous calls on official investigators who cannot give us their exclusive time, but you—"

"You're sure that explosion was a crime—not merely an accident?" demanded Parker.

"I'm positive it was sabotage," Carridine said firmly. "I'm just as positive that this catastrophe is the culmination of a series of crimes affecting our company, crimes which were first thought to be accidents. There's a gigantic undercover plot of some kind, far more serious than we have yet imagined!"

"What do you mean by that, Mr. Carridine?" demanded Parker.

Carridine turned to the man at his side.

"Explain to Parker about that data you have, Bingham," he said.

Cornelius Bingham, account executive for Mutual Underwriters, Inc., a large industrial insurance firm, produced a sheaf of papers. Small of frame, thin-faced, with a catlike nervousness, he was exact opposite of the impressive Carridine as he adjusted his nose glasses. But beneath them his eyes were sharp and penetrating.

"To summarize, Parker," he said, "there have been five separate 'incidents' of which last night's explosion is of course the most serious. Six months ago one of the Monarch Oil wells insured by us caught fire. Then Monarch started losing tank trucks in the mountains between here and Western Pennsylvania, where most of the wells are located. Four new trucks crashed under mysterious circumstances. Then the refinery office at Bayonne was burglarized and vital records stolen which threw our company weeks behind in our work."

"Meanwhile trouble began to develop in the Monarch pipe-lines eastward. Gasoline has not been getting through—the company is several hundred thousand barrels behind in pipe-line deliveries to the refineries. And now this final calamity—the gasoline that did get through destroyed!"

Bingham spread his thin hands in a gesture of hopelessness.

"Although Mutual underwriters have suffered the worst," Carridine explained, "much of the loss was not insurable, and our own company is in desperate straits. But the worst part is that the gasoline was destined for Army use. Uncle Sam needs gas—badly. This sabotage has got to stop! That's why we feel we'd like to have you, as well as the F. B. I. and the police at work on our problem."

WHEN Rex Parker did not immediately reply, the third member of the delegation spoke up. Henry Fairfield, multimillionaire, financier and sportsman, was a dapper, gray-mustached man who wore rough tweeds and carried a cane. He was said to hold a controlling interest in Monarch Petroleum.

"We'd like to have you with us, Mr. Parker," he said, in a soft, rather muffled voice, and smiled a little wryly as he added: "You must realize that, since we have come to you—when we're more accustomed to having newspapermen come to us."

"All right, gentlemen," said Parker, his mind make up after his moment of thought. "I'll do what I can. But I'd like to come to your office this afternoon and talk to all three of you there."

"Of course," said Carridine, as the three men rose. "If you can arrange to be there at, say two P.M., we will be waiting. And thank you, Mr. Parker."

After the men had gone, Winnie came in. Parker was telling her what they wanted him

to do when Tim, the red-headed copy boy, appeared in the open door, grinning as he held out an envelope.

"Guy at the gate said to give this to Rex Parker right away," said Tim.

Parker took the letter. "Thanks, Tim."

As the boy turned away, Parker opened the letter.

It read:

Rex Parker:

It would be a mistake for you to interfere in the Monarch Petroleum affair, since to protect my interests I should then be forced to arrange for your immediate liquidation.

The Ferret.

"The Ferret!" Parker looked at Winnie who had been reading over his shoulder. "A weasel-like carnivore, usually white, with red eyes, if I remember the description."

"Aren't you wonderful!" said Winnie. Taking the envelope, she looked to see when the letter had been mailed. "This was stamped by the post-office at two A.M. It hardly seems likely that any one of those three men who were just here would tell anyone they were coming to see you."

Parker nodded. "And since whoever wrote this letter apparently knew that the Monarch officials were going to get in touch with me, it looks as though one of those three men could be the Ferret."

"All the same I don't like the idea of someone threatening to—er—liquidate you, darling," said Winnie. "And I hate ferrets!"

"Don't go soft on me," Parker smiled at her tenderly. "We've worked together in dangerous spots before, and we usually barge through some way."

"You're right," Winnie smiled. "Carry on, Rex."

"Yeah." He yawned. "After I get a few hours sleep. This looks to me like a job when I'd better be wide awake."

CHAPTER III

A Long Drop



REX PARKER looked trim and refreshed as he strolled into the office of Detective-sergeant Dan Gleason of Homicide at noon. He had slept three hours, and with a shave, a shower, and fresh linen, he was read for action.

Gleason, a chunky, grim-jawed man, glanced up from his desk as Parker entered.

"Anything new on the Monarch explosion, Dan?" Parker asked, as he dropped into a chair. "I'm asking as a sleuth understand—not as a reporter. Though of course I won't turn down any news for the sheet."

"With luck we'll be able to wind up the business in a hurry," Gleason told him, "and by routine police methods. I've had a report from the hospital, and that taxi driver who unknowingly carried the explosives is made of pretty stout stuff."

"Wait a minute," interrupted Parker. "This is the first I've heard about any taxi driver who was carrying explosives. What about him?"

"Well," said Gleason, "this taxi driver brought a fare to the Monarch gasoline storage plant last night. They got in through the gate without any trouble. The passenger had a big square package with him. He told Jim Davison—he's the driver—to wait near one of the storage tanks for some men to unload the package. That's all—except the package blew up, and the passenger lammed."

"With this Davison still in the cab?" asked Parker.

"No. He heard something ticking inside the package and ran. He was knocked unconscious by the explosion but only badly bruised. He has been able to talk."

"Is he able to identify his passenger?"

"Yes, he swears he can identify the man who planted the bomb in his taxi—if we can find him. It took two other men beside the passenger to get the big package into the cab. We've located the hotel where these guys are registered. Identified them from the clear description Davison gave. Some of my boys are over at the hotel now."

"Registered?" demanded Parker. "You mean they're still there?"

"That's what my men are finding out," said Gleason. "Davison says three guys hailed him in front of the Wendell, a little hotel on Thirtieth Street. They lifted this big package into the cab and one of the men got in with it while the other two went back into the hotel. They didn't try to hide their faces from Davison, or keep him from seeing them go into the hotel—probably figured he was slated for death anyhow."

"Lots of people use taxis to cart stuff around the city and Davison didn't think much about it. His fare stopped to make a phone call, then wanted to go to the Monarch plant. Apparently the real guards were already dead when the taxi got there and some of the gang opened the gates."

Gleason leaned back in his chair and looked inquiringly at Rex Parker.

"Did you learn the identity of that young man who was found slugged to death outside the fence of the Monarch plant?" asked Parker. "He certainly wasn't killed by the explosion."

"He was a night elevator operator in one of the big apartment houses along the river. He had no connection with the Monarch plant. Apparently he came along, saw something he shouldn't and was killed."

"Three of the big shots connected with Monarch came to see me at the Comet office this morning and asked me to work on the

case as a private detective," the reporter said, and gave the sergeant the details of the visit from Carridine, Bingham and Fairfield.

GLEASON listened with interest, but no excitement until Parker showed him the note that had been signed "The Ferret."

"So he threatens to bump you off, uh?" said Gleason. "Looks like someone has given you quite a buildup to this Ferret guy."

"Listen, Dan," Parker said. "I'm going to be at the main office of the Monarch Petroleum Company at two this afternoon. It might be a good idea if you dropped in at the same time."

"I'll be there," Gleason promised, as Parker departed.

It was just five minutes to two when Rex Parker was ushered into Alan W. Carridine's private office.

Cornelius Bingham and Henry Fairfield were waiting with the president of the oil company.

The broad-shouldered Carridine sat at a modernistic flat-top desk of glass and plastic, and as he leaned forward it seemed as though the weight of his body would smash the glass. Bingham looked like a worried little white rabbit, but Fairfield was calm, leaning back in his chair, his hands resting on his cane.

Greetings had barely been exchanged when Carridine's phone rang, and the oil company president answered it.

"Who?" he said. "Detective-sergeant Gleason? Have him come in, please." He glanced at Parker as he put down the phone. "Gleason is in charge of the investigation of last night's explosion. He may have some news for us."

The sergeant entered, shook hands with the oil executives, but gave Parker only a curt nod. Apparently he did not care much for newspapermen who set themselves up as investigators.

He faced Carridine.

"I believe we're getting somewhere," he said. "The taxi driver who unknowingly brought the explosive to the plant last night has been released from the hospital. He's outside now with one of my men."

"Splendid!" exclaimed Carridine. "We're all anxious to hear his story. It may be a big help—especially if he can identify any of the men he saw."

Bingham glanced at his wrist-watch and leaped to his feet.

"My word! I promised Mrs. Bingham I would phone her at two-thirty! I'll be right back."

As the insurance man hurried out the door Henry Fairfield got to his feet.

"I have a call to make myself," he said. "No—don't disturb yourself, Carridine. There are public phone booths out in the corridor. If you will pardon me a few moments?"

"No use bringing in that taxi driver until we are all here," said Carridine, after Fair-

field had departed. "I wonder if you gentlemen will forgive me if I leave you for a minute. I've just remembered an important business appointment I want my secretary to arrange for me."

He stepped out of the office, leaving Gleason and Parker alone. Parker's brows were knitting, and suddenly he leaned over and asked Gleason sharply:

"Where did you leave Davison?"

"In the outer office. Why?"

"Bingham, Fairfield and Carridine were much too anxious to find an excuse to get outside when they heard that taxi driver was here," Parker said grimly. "Come on, Dan! We'd better make sure that Davison is all right."

WHEN they barged through the office door they found the reception office quiet.

No one was there save the blond receptionist who was busy typing. Parker glanced at Gleason, who frowned.

"Hmm," Gleason said. "I left Davison right here with one of my men."

With one accord Gleason and Parker hurried into the corridor. Halfway down it was the row of public phone booths that serviced this eighteenth floor.

Cornelius Bingham was just stepping out of a booth. He looked surprised when he saw Gleason and Parker.

"Not leaving, are you?" he asked anxiously.

"No," said Gleason shortly. "Just looking around."

Another phone booth door opened and Henry Fairfield appeared. He was smiling, as he twisted his gray mustache.

His expression grew blank as he spied the three men.

"Something wrong?" he demanded.

"Don't know yet," said Parker. "Wait for us in Mr. Carridine's office. We'll be back."

Fairfield nodded and followed by Bingham, entered the Monarch offices.

Rex Parker hurried to a window at the far end of the corridor, flung it open and leaned out. And what he saw many floors below chilled him to the marrow.

The side street was pack-jammed. Hundreds of people were milling around, and all traffic was at a standstill. Antlike men in blue had formed a ring to hold swarming antlike people away from a small knot of figures in the street.

Parker slipped from his pocket, small but powerful binoculars. Through them he saw a sprawled bloody pulp, limbs akimbo, lying in the middle of the street—something that had once been a man.

"Look!" Parker handed Gleason the glasses, and the sergeant peered down.

"It's Davison," he said grimly.

The elevator door opened and police appeared in the corridor. A bewildered detective hurried to Gleason.

"Davison fell out of a window, Sergeant!" he said.

"How did it happen, Healy?" Gleason snapped.

"Why, he said he was goin' into the wash-room a minute," Healy said. "Like a dope I didn't go with him. But he was a voluntary witness, not a criminal, and it was only a couple of steps away. How was I to know he'd fall out a window?"

Gleason's face was flushed with anger, but he kept a grip on himself.

"I suppose you can't be blamed," he muttered. "But this is going to look fine. The Detective Bureau lets its star witness fall out of a window! The poor guy—how could it have happened?"

"He could have been pushed," Parker said softly.

Gleason wheeled around. "You don't think—"

"But I do, Sergeant," said Parker. "I think it was murder."

"Come on!" the detective-sergeant growled. "I've got plenty of questions to ask Carridine, Bingham and Fairfield, big shots or not."

"Here they are now," said Parker as the three men appeared in the hallway, apparently curious as to the reason for the excitement. "But I doubt you will learn anything from them."

REX PARKER was right. Gleason questioned the three men individually, asking pointed questions, but none of them appeared able to throw any particular light on the tragedy.

"Bingham and I made phone calls at about the same time," said Fairfield. "You know that, Sergeant, for you saw us come out of the booths."

"Did either of you go near the wash-room?" Gleason finally asked.

"Why, yes, I did go in for a moment," Bingham said hesitantly. "I'm under doctor's orders—a prescription I must take every hour—pills. It was past the time for me to take them."

He drew a small round platinum box from his pocket.

Parker got a good look at it before Bingham put it back in his pocket.

"But I didn't see Davidson there," Bingham went on. "He was walking along the hall with the detective when I went into the phone booth to make my call."

Carridine said that he had been talking to his private secretary in her office, and had only just left her.

"If Davison was alone in the wash-room when the killer entered, Sergeant," Parker said finally, "his murderer could have been anyone. I'm sure these gentlemen had nothing to do with it."

"Guess you're right, Parker," said Gleason quickly. "Let's see if the fingerprint men found anything in the wash-room."



A blackjack flashed up, then descended with crushing force on the young man's head. (CHAPTER 1)

CHAPTER IV

A Bit of Ash

GLEASON and Parker went to the wash-room in the Monarch offices. Two detectives and a fingerprint man were there. The fingerprint man had gone over the faucets and found that while most of them bore a number of prints, one of them had been wiped clean. The push button on the automatic roller towel also

had been wiped clean.

At Parker's request, Gleason ordered the towel cabinet taken off the wall and sent to the police laboratory. Parker said he would like to look it over himself, and the detective-sergeant agreed.

Gleason was called to the phone and when he returned he informed Rex Parker that the detectives he had sent to the Hotel Wendell had reported that the two men who had been with Davison's fare were still registered at the hotel. But when Gleason and Parker, in a police car, sped through the heavy cross-town traffic to the hotel, the detectives on guard there ruefully told them that the two men had skipped.

Parker, however, insisted on talking to the desk clerk, and from him the reporter-detective learned that the two guests, now missing, had probably come from Pennsylvania, for a big black car with a Pennsylvania license had dropped the two men off at the hotel with their heavy package. An expensive new sedan, said the doorman who had spoken to the clerk about it.

"Pennsylvania," Parker muttered, as he moved away from the desk with Gleason. "Not much information there. Pennsylvania is quite a large state."

He and Gleason went upstairs and examined the room that had been occupied by the two men, but a quick search revealed nothing interesting. Parker strolled into the bathroom to take a quick look around, and Gleason followed him.

On the tile floor were crisp bits of blackened paper. Something had been burned to a cinder and the ash crunched underfoot. Parker dropped to his knees and examined the tiny black flakes through a pocket magnifying glass.

"It was a small piece torn from a newspaper," he murmured. "Here's a tiny bit that missed being stepped on—part of a column rule and a letter 'c'."

Parker scraped up the black dust carefully and brushed it into an envelope.

"Don't tell me you're going to try and put that back together again," Gleason said, puzzled.

"Hardly." Parker smiled. "Still you never

know where you may pick up a clue. Well, there's nothing more we can do here. I've got to get in touch with Winnie. There are some angles I want her to cover for me."

"I'll leave some men here," said Gleason as they left the hotel. "But I suspect it will be pretty much like that old gag about watching the stable after the horse has been stolen..."

Shortly after noon, Rex Parker and Winnie Bligh sat at a secluded table in a quiet restaurant. Parker told Winnie all that had happened, going into details about the murder of the taxi driver.

"And you haven't run across any real clues yet?" she asked when he had finished.

"I'll know better after I visit the police laboratory," said Parker. "What I'd like you to do is get me all the dope you can on Alan Carridine, Cornelius Bingham and Henry Fairfield. Their past lives, family connections—"

"I'm a newspaper gal, remember?" interrupted Winnie. "I know the Comet has a nice morgue where that sort of information is kept. How'll I get in touch with you later, Rex?"

"I'll phone you at the paper, darling."

After lunch, Rex Parker paid a quick visit to the morgue where he was permitted to examine Davison's body. It was a bloody, shapeless pulp, with the head destroyed beyond any semblance of humanness and the body mangled and smashed. An arm bandage, presumably resulting from the explosion, was dyed with dried blood, but the hand was in good condition.

PARKER took a soft, white puttylike substance from a small metal box in his pocket and pressed it against the fingertips and the palm of the hand. Wrapping the sticky substance in a clean handkerchief, he left the morgue and headed for the police laboratory. He explained his mission to Blakely, the laboratory man, and had him check with Detective-sergeant Gleason.

"Okay, Mr. Parker," said Blakely. "We have that towel cabinet here. Let's get to work."

Removing the toweling from the holder, they put it beneath a powerful Greenough super-microscope. For nearly an hour they worked, removing certain particles from the toweling with tweezers and subjecting them to chemical analysis.

Parker examined the puttylike substance he had pressed to the hand of the dead taxi driver. Tiny particles, too small to be seen by the naked eye, had been embedded in the ridges of the skin, and these he had picked up. He analyzed them carefully.

"Greasy dust from the taxi motor and the cab," he said. "Davison must have washed his hands, then moved over to the towel by the window to dry them. It was a low-silled window, and open. Apparently the killer entered while Davison was busy with the towel, and then shoved him out of the window."

"You noticed that the killer's hands were pretty well covered with tiny particles of tobacco?" asked Blakely.

"Yes," said Parker, "and it seems incredible that an ordinary smoker could get so much tobacco dust on his hands."

He produced the envelope containing the newspaper ash and the two men started working on it. The feathery bits were too shriveled and powdered to tell them much, but the powerful microscope brought out clearly the formation of several letters. Parker and Blakely studied these minutely, making comparisons with books of typographic styles.

It was an old-fashioned type face, probably dating from the early days of the linotype machine. At last in a type-founder's catalogue issued in 1911 Parker found it—a special seven-point Scotch-Roman type with poorly designed, narrow characters.

"This is luck," he exclaimed. "There should be little of this type left in use these days, and that chiefly in small, out-of-the-way towns."

"Sure," said Blakely. "All you've got to

Scouts," said Winnie. "This sporty old Henry Fairfield, for instance. I wouldn't trust him as far as you could throw that he-cow by the tail. He came from an old New York family, but they'd lost most of their money, and he started up as a patent attorney. An old oil man named Jason Garr sued him for patent infringement on some kind of oil refining gadget, and Fairfield was forced to pay big damages."

"You interest me," said Parker. "Continue, my sweet."

"It was proved that he had formed a dummy company to manufacture Garr's invention with only slight modification of design. That was in Nineteen-twenty-three. He was forced to stop manufacturing, disbarred of course, and financially ruined. He seemed to have dropped out of things completely, left New York flat, but in Nineteen-thirty-five he was back again, a multi-millionaire, and bought fifty-one percent of Monarch Petroleum, to say nothing of a yacht, a couple of summer homes and a stable of fancy bangtails. He's a widower with one daughter."

Next Issue: THE DELICATE APE, by Dorothy B. Hughes

do now is find the right town. It's as simple as that."

"I'm going to try," said Parker. "Thanks for working with me, Blakely."

He left the police laboratory and phoned Winnie at the Comet office.

"I've got the information you wanted, Rex," she said.

"Then meet me at my apartment in half an hour," said Parker. "And bring with you a copy of every small-town Pennsylvania newspaper you can lay your hands on. The smaller the town the better."

"All right," said Winnie. "But that's going to be a lot of papers."

An hour later Rex Parker arrived at his quarters in Greenwich Village. Winnie Bligh was waiting for him in the lobby, a pile of newspapers stacked up beside her.

"Am I glad you got here!" she said. "The people in this house think I'm part of a salvage drive or something. They've all been trying to give me more newspapers."

"Then we better get these papers into my apartment fast," said Parker, grinning as he picked up the bundle.

IN PARKER'S living room they spread the papers on the floor and he began to compare them with the type-book he had borrowed from the police.

"I've got the dope on those three big shots for you, Rex," said Winnie, as she pulled a notebook out of her handbag. "Can you listen and do that, too?"

"Go ahead," Parker said, hesitating over a newspaper, then putting it aside.

"Well, none of them are exactly Boy

Parker looked up. "You could find nothing about him between Nineteen-twenty-three and Nineteen-thirty-five?"

"Not in the Comet morgue," Winnie said. "But maybe I might check through some of his friends."

"How about Cornelius Bingham?" asked Parker.

"He's the one I can't figure out," said Winnie. "I couldn't find a thing about him until I phoned a man I know in the insurance business, who says that Bingham is a farm insurance man from South Dakota. He was strictly small-time out there, hardly made a living and was always getting in jams with his company by juggling funds to keep his farm clients' policies from lapsing for fear he'd lose the commission. He worried himself into a nervous wreck."

"How did he get where he is now?" Parker demanded.

"That's the strange part of it. One day Mutual Underwriters, Incorporated, one of the biggest industrial insurance firms in the East, hired him to take over their biggest account—Monarch Petroleum, and brought him on here from South Dakota. You try and figure that out, Rex. He's worth a couple of million now."

"What about the large president of Monarch Petroleum," asked Parker, looking through more papers.

"We've quite a lot of stuff about Alan Carridine in the morgue," said Winnie. "Typical oil man—born on a farm in the Pennsylvania oil country, been in the business all his life. Scout, tool-pusher, geologist, refinery man, promoter—all the rest."

"He really knows his business then."

"He does. He's fought down a couple of claim-jumping charges brought against him, and once in Texas he got six months in jail for being mixed up in an allegedly phony oil stock deal. But that was years ago, and plenty of big oil men have run into trouble with the law sometime in their career. He's been with Monarch twenty-three years. Worked his way right up the ladder to the presidency. He experimented with vegetables on the old farm as a hobby."

WINNIE snapped her notebook shut.

"And that's all," she said. "What am I to do now?"

Parker did not reply. One of the papers he had been examining had captured his attention and he was bending over it with his pocket microscope.

"This is it, Winnie!" he said excitedly. "Worn type, narrow seven-point letters—it matches the type book perfectly."

He was holding a four-page newspaper, atrociously printed. The masthead proclaimed it was the Lownesville Gazette—a weekly paper containing local news only—and that this was last Tuesday's issue.

Parker found a Pennsylvania road map in his desk and quickly located Lownesville.

"But couldn't other papers be using that type?" asked Winnie. "You haven't gone through them all yet."

"No, I think we've got the right one," Parker insisted. "The car that brought those two men to the Wendell Hotel was from Pennsylvania—and look here."

With a pencil he pointed to a dot on the map somewhat southwest of Oil City. He drew a careful pencil line between Oil City and Bayonne, N. J., just across the river from New York City.

"What's that?" Winnie wanted to know.

"The Monarch Petroleum main pipe-line," Parker told her. "To their refineries at Bayonne. And unless I'm much mistaken, it passes within just a few miles of Lownesville."

"Proving what?" asked Winnie.

"That since Monarch has been having pipe-line trouble that at least part of the Ferret's gang may still be working in that vicinity." Parker began searching through the paper. "If those two men brought something torn from a Lownesville paper to show to that third man it probably appeared recently and must have been important. But there's nothing about oil in this edition. It's mostly local gossip—small-town stuff."

"Are we going to Lownesville?" demanded Winnie.

"I am," said Parker. He smiled at her. "And don't look so disappointed. There's important work to be done here in New York. That's your job, Cap'n Bligh."

"I knew it," Winnie sighed. "I get the routine stuff and you get all the excitement. That's the life of a newspaper gal for you!"

CHAPTER V

The Pipe-line



SPIDERWEBS festooned the windows of the Lownesville Gazette. Within the ramshackle one-story building a plump, bald-headed man who sat before a clattering, ancient linotype machine rose at the sound of a knock, waddled to the front door and unlocked it, to stare in surprise at the impressive-

looking dark-haired man who stood waiting.

"Never saw you before, but come on in," said the newspaper editor in a creaky voice. "Lucky to find me, though. I stayed late tonight workin' on Tuesday's paper. Do all my own linotypin'. My name's Thaddeus Greenwood. What's yours?"

"Rex Parker," the reporter told him. "From New York. Detective. Sorry to bother you, Mr. Greenwood, but I thought you might have a map of the town."

"Reckon you must be hunting saboteurs for the Monarch people, eh?" the old editor said. "Sure, I've got a map."

He led the way to a yellowing township property map that hung on the wall behind cracked glass. Parker examined it carefully.

"I see there's a pipe-line pump station located here on the edge of town," Parker pointed to a gray-in square on the map. "Then the pipe-line must cut straight southeast, behind the town."

"That's right," Greenwood said. "I can show you exactly."

He drew a line with a stubby finger in the dust of the glass.

"These big farms across which the pipe-line cuts are interesting," said Parker. "Do you know these farmers?"

Greenwood smiled. "Reckon I do. Lived here all my life."

Parker drew out the copy of the Lownesville paper he had brought from New York, glanced over it, then frowned.

"I thought possibly one of these people listed as property holders would be mentioned in the paper," he said. "Do you remember an item about any of them?"

"Can't say as I do," Greenwood pushed back his green eye-shade to examine the names printed on the map. "Not last week."

"And there's not a word about oil in the whole paper," said Parker.

"That just happened to be," stated Greenwood. "There is usually."

"Just a minute." Parker was still looking at the map. "This schoolhouse here on the other side of town. Doesn't the paper mention something about a schoolhouse?" He began to search rapidly through the personal items. "Yes, here it is—a meeting to

be held there Monday evening at nine. That's tonight. It's been over several hours. Do you know anything about the Lownesville Hunt Club, Mr. Greenwood?"

"Yes, and no," the editor said reflectively. "That old schoolhouse isn't in use any more, not since we got the new school busses. Feller named Fredric Fenster that started the Hunt Club bought it from the township three years ago, along with the five-acre tract of woods between it and the railroad. People from town go hunting out there."

"The railroad," Parker said eagerly. "Yes, here it is—a double-track line running east and west. What is it used for mostly, Mr. Greenwood?"

"Tank trains," Greenwood said. "It picks up cars from the oil fields and hooks 'em up with the main line."

"This man Fenster—what do you know about him?"

"He came here about five years ago and bought a farm. Didn't farm it though. New York feller. Has some money. His place is right there near the schoolhouse."

PARKER glanced at his watch. It was nearly two in the morning. He asked instructions for reaching the schoolhouse, thanked Greenwood, and left the print shop.

When Rex Parker had reached Lownesville by train early that evening he had been fortunate in being able to rent a car for his own use. The coupé was now standing outside the Gazette building and Parker climbed in and drove away.

He could not help wondering whether or not he was not on a wild goose chase. All he had to go on was that the scraps of burned paper found in the hotel bathroom of the alleged saboteurs of the oil tanks in New York could have come from Lownesville.

The town was on a direct line between the Monarch oil fields and the refineries. Yet the only item in the Lownesville paper having even remotely to do with oil concerned a hunting club meeting near a railroad running from the Pennsylvania oil fields.

Yet something about the name Fenster had struck a responsive chord in Parker's

memory. Somewhere he had seen or heard that name before—not, he thought, in connection with oil. If he could remember.

The road wound over low wooded hogbacks, once he was out of the town—hilly waste country broken here and there by farms.

Abruptly he came upon a building on a high rise of ground surrounded by tall pine trees. The brightly moonlit cupola told him it must be the schoolhouse.

Parker halted his car a little way down the road. The schoolhouse windows were dark, but a feeling of danger stole over him as he sat staring at it before getting out of the car.

It seemed as though evil, unseen eyes were watching him. His hand touched the automatic that he wore in a shoulder holster. The feel of the cold steel felt good against his fingers.

"Maybe I'm sticking my neck out," he thought, as he climbed out of the car. "But here goes."

Silently he started toward the building. . . .

At the same time that Rex Parker halted his car near that schoolhouse, two men from the maintenance crew were walking the Monarch pipe-line on the other side of Lownesville.

They moved slowly through the bright moonlight, their eyes cast down as they picked an erratic course around the hogbacks, skirting the gullies and speaking only rarely. They were listening—listening to the sound of the "go-devil," the little roller-bearing gadget inside the pipe-line whose sudden stoppage warned of any obstruction to the flow of oil.

"How much farther to the pump station, Skipper?" finally asked the smaller of the two men—Tom Carridine.

The son of Alan W. Carridine was a slender young man with a pleasant, alert face and a manner which spoke of college training. For a year he had been with the company, shifted from department to department, learning the business from the ground up.

His companion, "Skipper" Clark, square-jawed and stalwart, glanced at the pedometer. [Turn page]

WHAT DO YOU SEE?

WHAT DO YOU SAY?

All the same except one . . . which is the odd picture?



ANSWER

Number Five. He is only "two-toothed."



eter he took from his pocket.

"Only three or four miles, unless we hit trouble," he said. "Keep your chin up, kid."

The night was chilly and frosty. The ground, soft from November rains, was beginning to freeze.

"Pretty wild country here," young Carridine said. "If a fellow lost his way, he might wander around for days."

"A big airliner crashed near here a few years ago," Clark remarked. "The wreckage wasn't located for nearly a month."

THE younger man shook his head.

"Things must be pretty bad," he said. "Their sending us out at night this way to walk the line."

"Things are plenty tough," said Clark. "Most of the trouble has been happening at night, and it's like nothing I've ever seen before. The pressure gauge at the Lownesville pump station has plain got the jitters. Why, last night it rose from eight hundred to darn near twelve hundred pounds, then took a nose dive. While it was up, the line oozed oil at a hundred different joints. Must have lost at least a couple of thousand barrels."

"They find out what was wrong?" asked Carridine.

"No. Today's crew didn't find a thing. That's why Tucker sent us out tonight."

"Somebody must be tampering with the line," Carridine said. "Deliberately blocking the oil flow to impede national defense."

"It could be," Clark reflected, "or maybe some stuff that got into the pipe when it was first laid—sticks, stones, insulating materials—might have mingled with the normal paraffine deposit to clog the line. Then when the pressure got high enough, they'd let go—and stick again later on. But this go-devil will tell us the story."

Just before the two had left that evening, the pump station boss, Tucker, had decided to let them walk a go-devil, although several such attempts previously had revealed nothing.

Presently they were in a strip of rugged wasteland near Lownesville, heavily wooded and cut by outcroppings of rock, around which the pipe line twisted snakelike. The moon cast tall, thin shadows from the trees.

"Kind of spooky, huh, Skipper?" young Carridine said. "Gosh, if saboteurs are tampering with the line and we should run into them, it wouldn't be so good, would it?"

"Forget it, kid," Clark said gruffly. "This is an old line and all crazy kinds of trouble is likely to happen. The go-devil will find it."

But Clark did not believe what he was saying. He was simply trying to reassure the younger man. For he was well aware that this twenty-mile section was sparsely settled, and that pro-Axis saboteurs, with one man who knew something about pipe-lines and a few simple tools, could work here unmo-

lested to slow down oil transportation.

And if Skipper Clark had happened to look behind the large boulder they had just passed, he would have seen how right had been his precaution of slipping a .38 automatic into his pocket before leaving the pumping station.

Three men lurked there in the shadows. Two were hard-faced, big-muscled men in shabby, nondescript clothing. The third was well-dressed and wore a dark green felt hat pulled down over thick blond hair. A long, jagged scar gave his face a sinister cast.

Hidden in the bushes behind the men was an automobile, a station-wagon of expensive make.

"Good thing we posted a lookout," the blond leader said softly, though his voice was harsh. "All right, let's get going."

The three, moving silently and keeping in the shadows, stalked the two men who were following the pipe-line. Three grim, vicious men with murder in their hearts.

UP AHEAD the land was uneven, and the pipe was buried so deep in spots that Clark and Carridine could not hear the go-devil. They were forced to follow markers with the aid of their flashlights, and wait for the sound—a job that required all their attention.

Several times the go-devil apparently struck minor obstructions and slowed down, only to speed up again as whatever had stopped it was carried ahead of it in the slippery pipe. But the real cause of the stoppage had not yet been reached.

"The trouble must be somewhere in that ravine just ahead," Clark said.

As the two men plunged down into the shallow ravine Carridine stumbled. Picking himself up, he started forward, but suddenly stopped and stood staring. He could see his own shadow, before him in the moonlight, but close behind him were two crouched shadows creeping stealthily nearer. In the hand of one was a gun!

Although Tom Carridine was a courageous as the average man, the sudden shock of seeing those shadows advancing toward him filled him with panic. He dashed forward in his frantic haste, lost track of the markers and headed too far to the left.

Then he saw Clark. The veteran pipeliner was on his hands and knees, his ear to the ground. He glanced up as Carridine staggered to him blindly.

"What's the matter?" he asked. "Stop to tie your shoe?" He pointed to the pipe. "I think we've spotted our trouble—right below here in these big loose rocks alongside the creek bed. The go-devil is stuck solid."

The black shadows were edging closer—three of them now—life-size silhouettes of men gliding along the ground like huge snakes.

"Skipper!" Carridine shouted. "Look out! Behind me!"

"Put your hands up!" snarled a voice from behind him. "Try reaching for your guns and we'll drill you."

Tom Carridine turned as he raised his hands above his head. He stared at three faces that were bleakly evil in the light of the moon, and at the guns in the hands of the trio.

CHAPTER VI

The Mysterious Fenster



LARK rose to his feet. He made no attempt to reach for the gun in his hip pocket. At a glance he saw the three men were killers and he had no desire to die.

"Hey!" he said, as he raised his hands. "You guys can't get away with a stick-up out here. We aren't carrying enough dough to make it worth

while."

"We can get away with anything we want—even murder!" said the blond leader of the trio, and the cold, dispassionate way in which he spoke left no doubt that he meant what he said.

Clark's forehead broke into a cold sweat. "You're just trying to scare us!" he said defiantly. "What did we ever do to you guys?"

"Shut up!" snarled the blond man.

He stepped forward, patted Clark's clothing and took the automatic. Then he searched Carridine but the son of the president of the oil company was unarmed.

"All right—start walking."

As the three men closed in on them with drawn weapons Clark and Carridine were forced to climb out of the ravine and keep going through the low underbrush until the summit of the next ridge was reached.

Before them in the white moonlight was a short rocky slope ending in a sheer drop of at least a hundred feet, with some shacks clustered at the foot. It was a gravel quarry, and a big slice of the hillside had been gouged out.

As the pipe-liners halted, guns were thrust into their backs.

"Straight ahead!" snapped the leader. "Keep moving!"

"But that would be murder!" Clark cried desperately. "If we hit that pile of broken rocks at the bottom we'll be killed!"

"That," said the blond man with the scarred face, "would simply be an unfortunate accident. You lost your bearings in the dark. That'll teach these Monarch people to send crews out at night!"

Clark attempted to swing around with his fists ready and catch the nearest man behind him off guard. But the fellow ducked, as

Clark swung, and kept his gun steady.

"If you'd rather go over the edge with a slug in your gizzard, that's all right with me," he said. "Get going."

Step by step the two pipe-liners were forced to the edge. Then suddenly both whirled, fighting for their lives. Clark hit one man in the face and knocked him back. Carridine's fist landed against the body of another.

"Don't shoot!" commanded the leader. "Knock them out with your guns. This must look like an accident."

A gun barrel caught Clark across the face with such force that he went hurtling backward over the cliff. Tom Carridine cried out in terror as he followed Clark into space. From below came a dull thud, then another. Loose rocks made a little rattling sound—then all was silence. . . .

A FEW miles away in the same moonlight that shone down on this ruthless murder, Rex Parker moved closer to the old schoolhouse. But since it did not pay to take foolish risks, he kept out of sight from the windows.

The building was in good repair, and shrubbery and trees showed signs of a gardener's care. The Lownesville Hunt Club appeared to be moderately prosperous.

Moving to a window at the rear, Parker peered in. The slanting moonlight revealed that the place had been transformed into a sort of club room, with an expensive-looking rug, comfortable chairs, and a bar at one end. Trophies and mounted animal heads decked the walls.

There appeared to be no one around and Parker was about to examine the window with his pencil flash when he became conscious of the softness of the ground under his feet. He turned the light of his flash on the ground. It was grassed over, but had not settled entirely. The beam of his flash caught the foundation of the building. So that was it—fresh masonry!

He could see the dividing line between the original foundation and the place where the old brick had been newly laid. A schoolhouse like this would not have a cellar, but from the looks of it, a cellar recently had been dug under the rear half of the school.

Parker tried the window. It was locked. His flash searched the frame and casing. He could detect no sign of a burglar alarm, still one might ring in some farmhouse nearby. Both telephone and electric wires ran into the schoolhouse.

"Still I'd better take a look around inside this place," he thought. "There's something strange about this set-up."

He took a small rubber suction cup from his pocket and fastened it securely in the center of one of the small panes of glass. Producing a glass cutter with a hard diamond point he ran it quickly around the frame. A few light taps brought the glass,

held by the suction cup, neatly out in his hand. He reached in, turned the lock, silently raised the window, and climbed in.

After drawing down the shades he prowled around with his flashlight. The lounge room showed signs of recent occupancy—the chairs displaced and papers on the floor. Cigarette stubs were piled in the ash trays. The meeting had been held all right.

On a sudden thought, Parker pulled a pair of big black goggles from his pocket and adjusted them.

"It might be better," he decided, "if no one knows who I am if I'm found here now."

On a table was a crumpled sheet of paper with jottings in pencil which appeared to be a schedule of events for the current hunting season. Parker carefully studied the formation of the letters. The "p" was made open at the bottom, the "f" was oddly formed, and a figure "7" had a horizontal dash through the center.

A closer examination of the handwriting might determine the nationality of the writer. Parker thrust the crumpled paper into his pocket.

Crossing to the bar, he examined the heavy wooden doors of a big wall cabinet. It was locked, but a little work with his skeleton keys enabled him to open it—and look into a secret storeroom.

Guns of all descriptions lined the walls and were stacked in long racks along the center of the room. Chiefly they were hunting rifles and shotguns. But there also was a solid rack of a big .48 Army modern rifles and on a shelf lay six submachine-guns.

"Handy, if this place happens to be the headquarters of a fifth columnist outfit," he muttered. "And it certainly looks that way."

HE TURNED his attention to the floor, seeking a way into the cellar he was sure had been built beneath the schoolhouse. Beneath a rug he discovered a trap-door with a sunken ring. He was lifting the door slowly when a hard voice behind him ordered:

"Put 'em up! We've got you covered!"

Simultaneously the lights in the room flooded into brilliance.

Parker released the trap-door and stood erect, careful to keep his hands away from his body. He longed to grab for his automatic, but he knew that would be to court death. He raised his hands to shoulder height and turned slowly.

The two men who faced him were an oddly assorted pair. One, in sports coat and gray slacks was youngish, with a ruddy, sun-tanned face, a black mustache, a neatly trimmed tuft of black hair on his chin, and a reckless, dashing expression. He held an automatic as though he knew how to use it.

The other man was tall and gaunt looking with sleepy eyes and a puzzled expression. He wore the livery of a butler, but obviously had dressed hastily.

"You have five seconds to explain what you are doing here," the man with the goatee said levelly. "Who are you?"

"Just a snoopy newspaperman," said Parker. "You are Fredric Fenster?"

Fenster nodded. "And you expect me to believe that you are a newspaperman—or that that gives you the right to trespass on private property? You entered by the window, and the alarm rang in my home a mile from here. So that makes you a common housebreaker." He glanced at the man beside him. "See if he is armed, Leeds."

The man in the butler's livery patted Parker gingerly and withdrew the automatic from the shoulder holster.

"Give it to me, Leeds," Fenster snapped.

"Yes, sir." Leeds handed the gun over to Fenster.

"No, I've changed my mind." Fenster frowned and waved the gun away. "Wipe the barrel so your own prints are not on it, and place it on the floor."

As Leeds followed instructions, Fenster's lips twitched into a smile, while his eyes held a deadly glint.

"You see how it was," he said to Parker. "When the burglar alarm summoned me, you threatened me with a gun. I shot and killed you in self-defense. Perfectly justifiable. Sorry and all that, but how was I to know you weren't a burglar?"

Fenster aimed his automatic carefully, murder lurking in his hard eyes. He was going to shoot to kill!

Parker had only a split second in which to act. He dropped to the floor, his left arm swinging forward in a lightning move. He had another gun which Leeds had not discovered—a high-caliber automatic in a sleeve-pocket just above his left hand. It was a device especially designed to meet such emergencies as this.

TWO guns barked at once. But Fenster's shot went high over Parker's head as the reporters shot caught Fenster in the wrist. Blood gushed from a severed artery as the automatic dropped from his fingers. Fenster bent over, holding his wrist, trying to fall back out of range, but Parker's automatic now was covering both Fenster and Leeds.

"You deserve to be shot down in cold blood, Fenster." Parker's voice was harsh. "In fact, I may decide to kill you yet." He glanced at Leeds. "Wrap your handkerchief around his wrist. Make a tight tourniquet."

The butler obeyed, and appeared to possess some knowledge of first aid. Parker stood with his gun ready until the job was done.

"Why did you try to kill me?" he demanded of Fenster then.

"Because I don't like smart snoopers who try to meddle in my affairs," Fenster snarled.

"What are those for?" Parker nodded toward the rows of Army rifles.

"This is a hunting club," Fenster said.

"What do you think they are for?"

"Those aren't hunting rifles."

"Well, some of our members use them to hunt with," Fenster said. "Others keep their guns here—all they happen to own."

"Including those tommy-guns?"

"Those are used for target practice. Some members like them—as a hobby."

"Why did you have a cellar built under here?" demanded Parker.

Fenster smiled defiantly. "Because the club wanted one—for furnace heat."

"We're going down there and see about that," Parker said grimly. "If you try anything foolish I'm going to put a bullet through you. You, Leeds, open that trap-door!"

CHAPTER VII

Blazing Inferno



LEEDS swung the trap-door open. A steep narrow staircase led downward. Fenster snapped on a light.

Parker picked up the third gun off the floor and placed it back in the shoulder holster.

He waved the two men downward with the automatic he still held, following close behind them.

The new furnace was there, all right. But something else in that cellar that was more interesting to Parker. Heavy wooden boxes, piled to the ceiling. Ammunition cases!

"I hope you won't think us unpatriotic," Fenster said sarcastically, "but when we stocked up we realized it would be difficult to purchase sporting ammunition during the war."

Parker did not reply. He was examining a boarded-off enclosure at one end of the small cellar. The door was locked.

"Open that door," he ordered crisply.

Fenster drew out a key and opened the door. The enclosure contained two folding cots, a chest, a chair, an electric plate, some utensils and provisions.

"Occasionally when a member wishes to remain here overnight," Fenster said, "we find this room convenient."

Parker was about to turn away when he noticed a small trickle of steam hovering over the coffee pot on the electric plate. He walked over and touched the coffee pot. It was hot.

His gaze shot upward. He saw that the new cellar had been built to extend a few feet past the rear of the building. In this space was another trap-door which must lead directly outdoors. A ladder was beneath the trap-door.

Someone had left this room within the last ten or fifteen minutes!

"Who was in this room?" Parker demanded.

"I was," Fenster said casually. "I remained here with a friend after the meeting. I had just arrived home when I heard the alarm." He shrugged. "There is nothing whatever to be concerned about here. I assure you we are a patriotic, sports-loving group."

"Except that you tried to kill me a few minutes ago," Parker reminded him.

"I was merely trying to frighten you away," Fenster said. "Otherwise I would have had to telephone the police and that would have kept me up most of the night."

Parker did not make any comment. He motioned with his gun and the two men preceded him upstairs. It was obvious to him that something shady was going on in the Lownesville Hunt Club, yet he could not connect it with the oil company trouble.

Fenster was still assuring Parker of the purity and patriotism of the Lownesville Hunt Club when they reached the outer door of the schoolhouse. Then something happened that cut him off in mid-sentence and left him rooted to the spot with his mouth open.

It was suddenly light outdoors!

In a split second the night darkness was transformed into the yellow brilliance of noontime. But it was not the soft warm glow of the sun. The light was flickering and evil and cast great moving shadows.

The next instant a rapid series of dull, rumbling detonations jarred the ground under Parker's feet. The schoolhouse creaked and groaned and glass showered down from the windows.

Beyond a line of trees to the north flames were leaping high in the air—a veritable wall of fire that rose in towering tongues to the sky.

"The railroad!" Fenster whispered hoarsely, pale-faced and quaking in the eerie light.

"It—it's horrible!" moaned Leeds.

"Get back in there—both of you!" ordered Parker, his gun covering them menacingly. "Move!"

THE two men stumbled into the schoolhouse. Parker backed them into a small clothes closet off the gun-room and turned the key in the lock.

He ran back to his car, jamming the goggles into his pocket. Climbing behind the wheel, he headed for the railroad.

Towering flames lighted his way. Waves of intense heat swept over him as he raced along the highway. In the windless night dense clouds of black smoke were sinking earthward.

Other cars were heading toward the scene of the explosion. Half-dressed farmers, routed out by the blasts, had piled into jalopies and trucks. A volunteer fire company was already on the road, sleepy men

getting into their rubber coats.

All knew that only one thing could cause such a fire—oil! The flames were coming from the railroad, so they knew what had happened.

Parker left his car beside the road and ran across the fields with the rest toward the railroad. Ahead was a deep ravine with a stream plunging along the bottom, but the heat was almost unbearable.

Then he saw it—at the bottom of the ravine. The white-hot, flaming, twisted wreckage of what had been an oil-tank train.

The locomotive had gone over the edge of the trestle, carrying every one of the cars along with it. The first cars had piled up in a crazy scrambled heap, while the others—what was left of them—lay in a snakelike line along the bottom of the ravine.

The instant explosion and fire of the first cars had generated such terrific heat that in spite of the modern fire precaution methods on tank cars, oil leaking from smashed plates and sprung seams had ignited every car.

Much of the ravine woodland was blazing. Streams of flaming oil coursed down the slopes. The steel trestle itself was twisted and sunken from the heat, and the ties were burned completely away. The chances of determining the exact cause of the accident would be slight indeed, for it would be hours before the trestle framework would become cool enough for a man to approach it.

More neighbors, police cars and fire apparatus kept pouring in from the surrounding countryside. But it was clear that nothing could be done to save any of the train's precious cargo of oil. Fire companies confined their efforts to preventing the spread of flames through the woods.

Parker returned to the road where State Police had posted guards to keep curiosity seekers away. He identified himself to the satisfaction of young, efficient-looking Lieutenant Marsh who was in charge as Rex Parker of New York, in the employ of Monarch Petroleum as an investigator.

"I'm sure glad somebody connected with Monarch is here to realize what we're up against," said Lieutenant Marsh. "Some dealer in sabotage is responsible for this, but the trail to whoever it is at least two or three hours cold already. All we have is a witness who noticed a new black sedan parked along the road here about midnight without lights. The guy who saw it was on his way back from some meeting."

"A meeting of the Lownesville Hunt Club?" asked Parker quickly.

Marsh nodded. "How did you know?"

PARKER rapidly told him what had taken place in the schoolhouse. He had barely finished when Marsh summoned a sergeant of police and issued crisp orders.

"Get Fenster and Leeds," he commanded. "Take them to Headquarters for questioning. If Fenster puts up a squawk, tell him

I want to see him about the stranger who broke in there tonight."

"Then you've suspected Fenster before this?" Parker asked when the police sergeant departed.

"We've been trying to get something on that guy for three years," said Marsh. "We don't much like that club he's running, but so far he's been too smart for us. On the surface he's a solid citizen."

Lieutenant Marsh went on to say that before Pearl Harbor neighbors had reported seeing Frederic Fenster and his club members holding military drill in uniform. However, when the F. B. I. had swooped down on them no trace had been found of any uniforms, nothing seditious, and all firearms were duly registered.

"We've known that something fishy has been going on out there," Marsh continued, "but what can we do? Some local people suspected of being Nazi sympathizers are members, but Fenster himself has never said or done a thing that could be considered un-American."

"He's clever all right," agreed Parker.

"Yeah, and it looks as if we couldn't pin anything on him about this wreck, either," said the lieutenant. "There was a car parked here. You can see where the tires flattened the grass, and there's a clear mud print of a tire with a diamond-shaped tread—the right rear. We were lucky to get here before the mob did."

Spotlights from three police cars were turned on the trampled place and troopers were searching the ground inch by inch.

"There's one chance in a thousand of finding anything that'll help us," Marsh muttered, "but we can't afford to skip the possibility."

Parker joined in the search. Off to one side beyond the glow of the searchlights his sharp eyes discovered a crumpled bit of paper and he picked it up. It was the cellophane wrapping from a package of cigarettes. He smoothed it out and regarded it thoughtfully.

"Thinking about fingerprints, Mr. Parker?" asked Marsh, looking over his shoulder. "Afraid there's not much chance. Half the time we find burned matches and cigarette packages at the scene of the crime, but I've never yet seen a print man getting much from them. Handled by too many people."

"I wasn't thinking about fingerprints," Parker looked intently at the cellophane. "Do you notice anything here along the edge of the wrapper?"

"Sure," Marsh said. "There's a sort of an imprint there—three circles—"

"Three pennies," said Parker. "Which means that these cigarettes were bought in some state with relatively high cigarette taxes—probably New York. Certainly not Pennsylvania or New Jersey. The cigarettes were bought from a machine for twenty cents, and those three pennies are returned

to him, wrapped with the cigarettes."

"Then you think the car bearing the wreckers came from New York?"

Parker shrugged. "The paper looks fresh. Of course it's only surmise."

"It's pretty clear that a percussion explosive was used," Marsh said. "Probably dynamite, hidden beneath the track and rigged to the rail to explode when the train passed over. The gang who did it might be nearly back in New York by now."

"That seems a likely thing," agreed Parker.

"Well, every patrol car in the state is on the lookout for that car—although they haven't much of a description. It may be picked up at one of the Delaware River bridges into Jersey."

ATROOPER came up to Marsh on the run.

"We followed their trail toward the bridge, Lieutenant," he said. "There must have been four or five men in the gang. And look what we found!" He held out a small leather case.

Marsh seized it eagerly. His face lighted up.

"This is a break!" he exclaimed. "Eyeglasses from a Lowmesville optician. The prescription can be traced. Where did you find them, Andrews?"

"In some thorn bushes," the trooper said. "Those guys must have got tangled up while they were carrying the explosive through. One of them dropped his glasses."

Marsh smiled at Parker. "This sort of knocks your New York theory for a loop, doesn't it? Maybe Frederic Fenster is our best bet after all."

As the lieutenant gave brisk orders to two men to look up the optician immediately Rex Parker remained silent. It seemed to him that criminals bold enough to carry off this train wreck would not be stupid enough to drop a pair of glasses. Still veteran crooks often did make mistakes.

At last when a red rim of sun showed over the wooded hills, the emergency fire fighters had brought the blazing woods under control, Parker returned to State Police Headquarters with Lieutenant Marsh. But he had the disturbing feeling that so far his adversaries had taken every trick. Tonight thousands of dollars' worth of oil had gone up in smoke and he had been helpless to prevent it.

He set his jaw grimly. Perhaps further questioning of Frederic Fenster, who had just been brought in to the station, would reveal something.

He and Marsh were about to talk to Fenster when the lieutenant's phone rang. Marsh listened, grim-faced. Parker could tell from Marsh's tense manner that something had gone decidedly wrong. At last the lieutenant hung up and sprang to his feet.

"That was the Lowmesville pump station," he snapped. "Two of their pipeliners fell to their deaths into the quarry west of town. They've just been found—and Tom Carri-

dine, son of the president of Monarch Petroleum was one of them."

"Carrodine's son!" exclaimed Parker. "How far is the pipe line from the quarry?"

"About a quarter of a mile. They must have got lost in the dark and stumbled over."

"I wonder if they did?" murmured Parker. "Better have Alan Carrodine notified immediately—then we'd better get to that quarry in a hurry!"

CHAPTER VIII

Scared Blonde



IT WAS early evening in New York. Just half an hour before Rex Parker had left Winnie Bligh at the Comet building and departed for Lowmesville, Pennsylvania.

Winnie had spent that time trying to learn what she could about how Cornelius Bingham come to be such an important executive. She had been in touch with a Comet correspondent in Sioux Falls who had been working most of the day gathering all of the information he could on Bingham's background. But what Winnie had learned by long distance phone was not much.

Neither the newspapers there nor the police knew anything about Bingham. The South Dakota Dairymen's Benefit Society, for which Bingham had sold insurance could tell nothing except that he had been with them for seventeen years up until 1933.

Winnie had persuaded the Comet's financial editor to see what he could learn from various insurance men regarding Bingham. He had found one man who had known Bingham in his farm insurance days.

"Bingham was shrewd, quick-witted," was the report. "When farm prices collapsed after the first World War, he pulled off some pretty fast deals to keep his policyholders going. But he was strictly small-time. First time he even left South Dakota was right after the Japanese earthquake."

The financial man had thought he had something there, but the explanation was disappointing. Several boatloads of cattle had been shipped from this country to relieve conditions after the great quake of 1923, and a consignment from South Dakota had contracted anthrax in San Francisco. Bingham had been sent with some other company representatives to adjust claims and see that the rest of the cattle got safely abroad.

All of which certainly did not account for Bingham's suddenly being hired by Mutual Underwriters, and handed the huge Monarch Petroleum account.

When Winnie Bligh finally left the Comet

office, she hailed a taxi and gave the address of Henry Fairfield's home in the Eighties off Park Avenue. But when she reached the residence, the butler told her frigidly:

"Mr. Fairfield sees no one except by appointment."

"Tell him it is Miss Bligh from the New York Comet," Winnie said.

"Come in, please," said the butler, his manner changing. "He left instructions to admit anyone from the Comet. Wait in here, please, Miss Bligh."

He showed Winnie into a dark-paneled, book-lined library. Priceless tapestries adorned the walls between the shelves, illuminated by soft lights. Everything spoke of wealth and refinement.

Far-off, Winnie could hear a man's voice, speaking intermittently. Someone was telephoning. She could not resist picking up the extension phone which rested conveniently at her elbow.

The voice of a man, suave, polished, was saying:

"But my dear fellow, what else do you expect me to do?"

The tone of the man on the other end of the wire was harsh and excited.

"I expect you to tell the truth, Fairfield. Give the F.B.I. and Parker something to work on. You can keep yourself out if you play it right."

"You must be out of your mind, Bingham, if you think I know anything about this sabotage," said Fairfield's voice. "I'm the biggest stockholder in Monarch—what could I possibly stand to gain by what's happening?"

WINNIE listened tensely. Henry Fairfield was talking to Cornelius Bingham!

"You're carrying Mutual Underwriters to the verge of ruin!" Bingham rasped. "No insurance company can pay millions in indemnities within a single month. You've got to tell them who really controls Monarch Petroleum—or I will!"

"You're stark, raving mad, Bingham." Fairfield laughed easily. "I control Monarch, and if you start digging up old skeletons—"

Winnie swiftly put down the telephone. Out of the corner of her eye she had caught a flash of movement.

"Stand up!" ordered a feminine voice behind her. "Raise your hands!"

Winnie swung around to face a slim, pretty blond girl in a white evening frock with gardenias at the waist. Her face was set in grim determination and the revolver she held in one slender white hand was pointing directly at Winnie.

"Who are you?" the girl demanded curtly.

"I'm Winnie Bligh from the New York Comet," said Winnie. "I thought Mr. Fairfield wouldn't mind my making a phone call while I was waiting."

"I don't like liars," the girl snapped. "My

father is talking on another phone. You were listening."

Winnie smiled. "Then you are Cynthia Fairfield?"

Fairfield's daughter nodded. "But I don't understand. My father asked the Comet for help, didn't he? So why are you spying on him?"

"Reporters just snoop from force of habit," Winnie said, still smiling.

Cynthia's eyes were cold, and she did not smile. "Has my father bought off the Comet with his millions, the way he buys everyone else?"

Winnie's smile faded. "Look here, Miss Fairfield. I don't like that. And if you want to get tough, I can get tough, too. Now put that gun away before I take it away from you."

"Stand back!" Cynthia snapped.

Winnie laughed. Her hand shot out with the skill that Rex Parker had taught her. She knocked the gun aside, seized Cynthia's wrist, squeezing the muscles.

Cynthia looked surprised as the gun dropped to the floor. Then she flung away, blazing-eyed. Winnie picked the gun up and dropped it into her purse.

"You fool!" Cynthia cried. "If you're not on his side, I can help you. I—"

She broke off abruptly, and Winnie read stark terror in her eyes. Cynthia was glancing over her shoulder, toward the door.

Winnie wheeled around. In the doorway stood a dapper, gray-mustached man, an amused smile on his face.

"Good evening, Miss Bligh," said Henry Fairfield. "I'm afraid my daughter isn't giving you a very cordial welcome."

He strolled into the room, frowning at his daughter.

"Cynthia, I've asked you again and again not to disturb my guests, haven't I?" he demanded.

Cynthia backed away from him, her eyes defiant.

"Go into the music room, dear," Fairfield said more gently. "Mrs. Bowden is waiting for you there. I'll join you directly."

CYNTHIA turned sullenly and for an instant her eyes met Winnie's. In their depths was terror and appeal so intense that Winnie stared after her until the door closed. What was this? Did Cynthia Fairfield live in mortal fear of her own father?

"Don't let my daughter upset you, Miss Bligh," Fairfield's suave voice cut in. "Those who know her make allowances. Cynthia's mother, now dead, was—shall we say, not altogether well? Cynthia has inherited an extremely neurotic temperament. As long as she remains quiet, she is quite all right. But any little excitement and she becomes hysterical, dramatizes her flights of fancy, poor girl. I hope you understand."

"You mean she is under a doctor's care?" Winnie said noncommittally.

"A psychiatrist visits her, but there is little he or anyone can do. She needs peaceful surroundings, quiet," Fairfield shrugged.

"Why was she wearing an evening gown?" Winnie asked pointedly.

"She likes to dress up," Fairfield smiled sadly. "A harmless pleasure." Abruptly his manner grew businesslike. He sat down, facing Winnie. "But you wished to see me, Miss Bligh? Some new development in solving the oil tank disaster, I hope."

"In a way," said Winnie. "Mr. Parker asked me to see you and get what information you were willing to give regarding any personal enemies you might have."

"I see," said Fairfield thoughtfully. "Off-hand I can't think of any personal enemies who might be back of all this trouble."

"Mr. Parker spoke about a man named Jason Garr," Winnie said.

"Oh, Garr," Fairfield flashed his quick smile. "He's been dead a good many years. He won his suit against me, but lost his shirt when he tried to manufacture on his own. No, I'm afraid Parker is off on a false scent there."

"Just what did the Garr patent consist of?" asked Winnie.

"You'd have to know the refinery business to understand, but it was the device that made the pipe-still practicable for large-scale refining—a tricky little thermostatic valve."

"Afraid I don't understand," said Winnie with a smile. "But it sounds quite impressive, Mr. Fairfield."

"Yes, it was unfortunate for Garr and for me that his backers were unable to get into production as soon as the patent was allowed. Meanwhile a man named Lambert who had invented a similar patentable device was already manufacturing. Through intermediaries, I—er—invested with Lambert. It was then decided that the patents conflicted and my connection with Lambert was unfortunately disclosed and I was accused of stealing my own client's patent—which naturally made me appear a reprehensible person."

Fairfield smiled so blandly it was hard for Winnie to believe that he really had stolen the patent—which had been conclusively proved in court. There was a curious charm about the man.

"You must have had a lot of unfavorable publicity, Mr. Fairfield," Winnie said. "Perhaps made enemies you didn't know about."

The ex-patent attorney casually lighted a cigarette. "I was finished in New York for any legitimate business. I was still young, and had always wanted to see the world. So I changed my name and went to Australia. I struck it rather lucky in wool there. I stayed there until I thought New York had forgotten what a scoundrel I had been thought to be, then returned, quite well-heeled, as they say."

"And that was when you established your present connections?" demanded Winnie.

"Yes. I saw a good chance during the depression to buy into Monarch Petroleum. It proved an excellent investment until this sabotage—" Fairfield spread his hands. "I must be just about broke."

Winnie brought the conversation around to Cornelius Bingham and Alan Carridine, but aside from what she already knew, she got no information, nothing concerning the coincidence of Bingham's taking over the insurance the same year Fairfield obtained control of the company; nothing of Carridine except that he had been promoted from general manager to president upon the death of the previous president.

She had to give it up.

CHAPTER IX

Snatched!



THE LAST Winnie took her leave. She felt that she had gleaned some valuable information for Rex Parker, although she did not believe all Fairfield had told her. There was something basically unscrupulous beneath his polite veneer.

Parker suspected that either Fairfield, Carridine or Bingham had written that threatening note signed "The Ferret." But it was difficult to believe that Fairfield could be behind a plot to destroy his own company.

As Winnie was about to depart, the phone rang in the adjoining study, and when Fairfield glanced in that direction uncomfortably, Winnie quickly insisted that he answer it, saying that she could let herself out the front door, and that there was no need to ring for the butler who apparently had been called to another part of the house.

She hurriedly left the library as Fairfield moved as quickly toward the study.

In the hall, she swiftly examined the gun she had taken from Cynthia. It was a small, snub-nosed revolver, fully loaded, and with an ornate carved ivory handle set with jewels. It bore the initials, "HGF," and in place of the maker's name there was a row of Chinese characters and the date, "1929."

Odd, Winnie thought, realizing that Cynthia must have purloined her father's gun. Fairfield had said he was in Australia in 1929.

A swift glance about showed Winnie that no one was around. As a precaution, though, she opened the front door and closed it noisily, as though she were going out, then quickly crossed the hall to where, through glass paneling, she could see a piano, dimly lighted.

Cynthia was seated on the bench, her head in her hands, her soft blond hair falling across the keyboard. Her slim shoulders

heaved slightly, for she was crying.

Winnie entered quietly.

"Cynthia," she said softly.

The blond girl turned, the same terror in her eyes. Then instantly her finger was at her lips for silence. Tensely she beckoned Winnie to her.

"I heard what he said," Cynthia said in a low voice. "That I was neurotic, dramatized myself. That's a lie. Sorry I pointed that gun at you. I thought you were someone else he'd brought here to watch me. I suppose I have grown nervous, suspicious, but you wouldn't blame me if you knew—"

"This Mrs. Bowden your father mentioned," said Winnie. "Where is she?"

"She may be back any minute," whispered Cynthia. "She's supposed to be a secretary-companion. My father hired her to watch me. He's afraid I'll tell—" Her eyes sought Winnie's appraisingly. "If I only could have faith in you! I don't dare tell. He's threatened—"

Winnie made up her mind.

"You're coming with me right now," she said. "You can have faith in me. I'm taking you some place where you'll be safe. Don't bother about a coat. We can make it out the front way."

"All right, I'll go with you!" Cynthia was breathless with excitement. "Hurry—before Mrs. Bowden gets back!"

WINNIE tiptoed to the door and peered out. Still no one in sight in the hall. Winnie backed to Cynthia and in a moment later they were outside the front door.

A taxi which had apparently just discharged passengers down the street was rolling away from the curb. Winnie signaled, the driver pulled up in front of the house, the two girls climbed in and were whirled away down the street.

"The Comet Building," Winnie told the driver.

And then unexpected things began to happen.

The taxi, which had shot across Lexington Avenue with the green light, jerked to a sudden halt along the curb of dimmed-out Eightieth Street behind another car. Two men sprang from opposite sides of the other car and leaped to the doors of the taxi.

Winnie fumbled for the gun in her purse, but before she could get it out two hard-faced, heavily-built men were pushing into the taxi.

"Not a peep out of either of you dames," muttered one of the men, emphasizing the order with a flourish of a gun.

"I gather these aren't the Rover Boys, Cynthia," Winnie said dryly. "I wouldn't try to scream."

"I didn't figger on two of 'em, Joey," the cab driver said. "But I guess you guys can handle 'em."

"We'll take care of 'em," growled the man with the gun.

He drew a cloth out of his pocket. Winnie caught a whiff of a sickish-sweet odor. She knew what was coming and tried to hold her breath as the damp, heavy-smelling rag was thrust against her mouth and nose. But the penetrating chloroform fumes soon were numbing her brain.

She drifted off into insensibility. . . .

Winnie Bligh could not have told how long afterward it was when somewhere far off a bell tinkled intermittently.

She opened her eyes. Her mind was foggy and she felt a violent impulse to be sick. She was in a car, but the car was not moving. Gradually memory of the night's events penetrated her consciousness.

She saw Cynthia beside her, still unconscious, her head against the cushions. The rear curtains were drawn. One of the two thugs was on the other side of Cynthia, but the other man was no longer in the car.

Winnie realized that she must have regained consciousness earlier than her captors had expected. Her captor was not looking her way, but she knew that her slightest movement would attract his attention.

As her mind cleared, the far-off tinkling materialized into the bell of a gasoline pump. And then she could hear an air hose being unreeled.

A soft tire! Luck had given her a break!

The gas station was brightly lighted, and other cars were under the canopy. She could jump out, dash for cover and be safe before her captors knew what it was all about.

But she could not leave Cynthia. Soft tire or not, the car would certainly speed away—with Cynthia in it.

Winnie desperately racked her brain. How could she get Cynthia out? How could she best attract the attention of the other motorists and attendants? Then it was too late!

The rear tire had been filled with air and the other gangster was getting into the front seat with the driver.

"All right, let's get going," he muttered.

The cab started. Winnie had no idea where she was being taken or why. Perhaps she and Cynthia were to be murdered and tossed out along a deserted road.

IT WAS now or never. If she could reach over suddenly, grab the wheel and send the taxi crashing into that light post—

She sprang forward, got her hand on the wheel and tried to wrench it around. The cab swerved, but not far enough.

"Get her, Joey!" rasped a voice.

A hard fist caught Winnie squarely on the chin and knocked her back, to sprawl motionless as everything went black again. . . .

She was finally aware of driving through narrow streets, then cool air struck her face, and she was being carried up a flight of steps.

Then she was in a smoke-filled room, lying on a couch. Cynthia was not there.

Men's voices kept up a constant mutter,

but a little later everyone was gone and she was alone. A square of darkness that was an unshaded window became gradually lighter. It was nearly dawn. Winnie staggered to her feet.

Her one thought was to get out of this place at once. She could do nothing for Cynthia while she, herself, was still a prisoner. Perhaps she might be able to bring help later.

Winnie peered out the open window. A fire-escape was a thing of shadows and black bars in the gray light. She glanced back into the room. A wallet and a notebook that apparently had dropped out of someone's pocket were lying beside a chair. She stuffed them into her handbag that had been left on the couch beside her.

"Got to get out!" she muttered. "Here goes."

She climbed out onto the fire-escape. It looked a long way down—four or five floors. She began climbing down the ladders, holding her handbag in her teeth by its strap. The ladders groaned and creaked, and she expected to be discovered at any moment, but she only moved faster until she dropped from the bottom rung of the last ladder into a dark alley, landing on the ground in a heap.

Scrambling to her feet, she hurried along the alley to the street. It was deserted in the dawn, but when she had walked three blocks she finally found a taxi just as the sun broke through the clouds and morning greeted the city. New York seemed to come to life like a huge giant whose yawn was the sound of traffic.

"Take me to Police Headquarters in Centre Street at once," Winnie said, her voice was sharp, commanding. "Hurry!"

"Yes, ma'am," said the cab driver with respect in his tone.

As she rode downtown, Winnie made notes on the location of the house for Rex Parker's information and as an aid to the police. No doubt the kidnapers would flee once they discovered her escape, but they might leave some clue behind.

She looked at herself in the cab mirrors. Her hair was mussed, there was dirt on one cheek, and her clothes were wrinkled. She looked as if she had been sleeping on a park bench.

She got out comb and make-up and went to work to make herself more presentable. Winnie Bligh was more her lovely self when at last her taxi stopped in front of Police Headquarters and she went inside in search of Detective-sergeant Dan Gleason of Homicide.

DESPITE the early hour, the sergeant was in his office.

"Winnie Bligh," Gleason exclaimed as he rose from his desk. "What brings you down here so early?"

"I was kidnaped, Sergeant," she said as she dropped wearily into a chair. "So was

Cynthia Fairfield. The gang still has her."

She told him all that had happened.

"That's strange, Winnie," Gleason said, when she had finished. "The Fairfield girl certainly should have been missed by now. The police would have been notified."

"Weren't they?" asked Winnie in surprise.

"Not as far as I know."

Gleason picked up his telephone and called the Fairfield home. When he hung up he turned to Winnie with a frown.

"Somebody's crazy," he said. "Henry Fairfield says his daughter left last night to visit some friends at a hunting lodge in Canada."

"But that's a lie!" Winnie flared. "I was with her! I—"

Gleason looked dubious. "I've no authority to order a search for somebody until they're reported missing. Of course I believe you, and Fairfield is one of the men Rex suspects. I'll stick my neck out and comb the city for her."

"Good!" said Winnie, relief in her tone. Then she gave him the location of her prison and finally asked: "Have you heard anything from Rex?"

"Yes, I just talked to him long distance an hour ago," said the sergeant. "There's been a terrific explosion and fire out there—an oil train."

"Rex is all right?" demanded Winnie anxiously.

"Sure is," Gleason smiled. "He asked me to get in touch with you, Winnie. Wanted me to tell you that he needs you out there."

"All right," said Winnie. "I'll take the first train that I can catch as soon as I get some fresh clothes and phone the paper. After all, I do work on the Comet."

CHAPTER X

Snuff and Insects



WITH the coming of morning Rex Parker drove rapidly along the winding Pennsylvania road leading to Alan Carridine's farm midway between Lownesville and Oil City.

The Monarch president had been born and raised on this farm. Since becoming a wealthy man he had spent thousands of dollars in remodeling and

modernization, and indulged in experimental farming as a hobby.

Tenant farmers worked the land, and he visited it but rarely. His two spinster sisters still lived on the farm, and Carridine, who had arrived from New York had asked the State Police to have his sons body taken there.

When Parker drove along the farm's shady driveway and stopped before the big old rambling house, he could see long rows of hothouses at the rear. In the distance were

neatly fenced fields.

A maid admitted him, directed him in whispers to a low-ceilinged oaken-beamed living room.

Alan Carridine, hollow-eyed and listless, was sitting in a deep chair. The voice of an announcer was droning almost inaudibly from the radio at his side, but Parker made it out:

"—tests recently conducted in Pittsburgh showed that Monarch has twenty-six per cent more starting power than other gaso-lines—"

As he saw Parker in the doorway Carridine snapped off the radio and rose to his full six-feet-four. But he was not the brusque, efficient executive that Parker remembered in the New York interviews. Grief had broken him.

"My company's program," he said with a wan smile. "I'm so used to it, I suppose I turned it on—I don't know why—" Carridine's jaw clenched grimly. "You can't imagine how this thing has hit me, Parker," he said. "My son's death is a blow a thousand times worse than anything that has happened. You think it was an accident, don't you? This gang that's trying to smash my company couldn't have deliberately killed my son?"

"They're capable of it," Parker said gently. "But I don't know whether they did or not. I could find no definite clues. I need more information about this stretch of pipe-line. That's why I phoned Tucker, your pump station superintendent, and asked him to meet us here."

"He's here—waiting in the conservatory," Carridine said. "Bingham, the insurance man, is here, too. About the tank car blast. We came from New York together."

As Carridine spoke Bingham and Tucker entered. Bill Tucker was a sandy-haired man in his late forties with an outdoor look. Parker began to question him immediately.

"No, we don't usually let men walk the line at night," Tucker said. "Only in an emergency—such as last night. Less than five hundred barrels of oil came through all day—just a trickle. And the day crew reported leakages at pipe joints all along the line—oil lost forever. I had my pumps going full blast and they couldn't pull any more oil through."

"Did that go-devil they were following come through to your station in the pipe?" asked Parker.

Tucker shook his head. "It must have stuck in the line somewhere unless somebody broke the line and the go-devil was taken out. They could have put some kind of plug or valve in. There are plenty of places where tampering wouldn't show on the surface—like in sand or gravel or a plowed field."

"But breaking a pipe-line to put in a valve would be quite a job, wouldn't it, with oil flowing through?" demanded Parker.

"It would take somebody with a knowl-

edge of pipe-lines," agreed Tucker.

"Incidentally I noticed some old farm buildings near that quarry," said Parker. "There were fresh tire marks nearby."

"Those buildings were falling to pieces long before the pipe-line was put in," Tucker said. "There's an old road leading to the farm but I don't know what a car would be doing in there."

PARKER turned to Alan Carridine.

"I wonder if you could help me with another technical problem?"

"Gladly, if I can, Parker," Carridine said.

"It's about refining," said Parker. "I understand that the pipe-still is a relatively recent invention in the history of oil. What was used before the pipe still was invented?"

"The shell-still," Carridine told him. "The old standby of the business. We worried along without pipe-stills a good many years."

"Can a shell-still be converted into a pipe-still?"

"Possibly. But it's cheaper and better in most cases to build a new pipe-still."

"Then what happened to all the old shell-stills in the country?" Parker appeared to have a definite object in his questioning.

Carridine shrugged. "A good many of them were torn down, but some of them are still standing. You run into them all over the oil country. A few of the best ones are being reconditioned to handle Government orders. They're much less efficient, but it's a question of time and materials."

"Look here, Mr. Parker!" Cornelius Bingham broke in impatiently. "We're wasting valuable time. Good heavens, man, don't you realize that thousands and thousands of dollars' worth of oil were lost in that train wreck? And you haven't even mentioned it!"

"Sorry, Mr. Bingham," said Parker. "But we have to consider the whole situation."

"Personally the death of my son is most important of all to me," Carridine said bitterly.

"But nothing has been done to track down the culprits responsible!" Bingham glared at Parker. "Why don't you get some action?"

Nervously he began feeling around in his pockets. He drew out a small round platinum box, a card case and some keys before he found what he was looking for—his glasses. He pinched them onto the bridge of his sharp nose and drew out a paper.

"Just let me read you the figures on the Monarch account," he said. "The indemnities we've paid in the past few months are ten times the premiums for the past ten years. It—"

"Not now, Bingham," interrupted Carridine. "Mr. Parker has been doing all he can."

Parker's attention had been fixed on the insurance executive.

"That little metal box you just had in your hand appears to be an excellent piece of

workmanship, Mr. Bingham," he said. "Mind if I look at it? It's a pill-box, isn't it?"

Bingham looked up sharply, his thin face reddening oddly.

"It doesn't seem to me this is the time for—" But as he caught Parker's steady eyes on him his hand went slowly into his pocket and he drew out the box. Parker turned it over in his fingers.

"That's a snuff box," Bingham explained. "A habit I picked up from farmers in the Dakotas. Try to disguise it in the East."

Parker snapped open the lid. The little platinum box was filled with snuff, as Bingham had said. Parker smiled and handed back the box.

"Mr. Bingham is right," he said then. "We've wasted enough time. We've got to get to work."

AS THEY went to a side entrance of the farmhouse, near which Parker's car was parked, they passed the huge glassed-in greenhouses.

"I understand you're an experimental

type organizations in the South before he came to Pennsylvania."

"A full confession," Parker repeated. "You mean he confessed to blowing up the oil train?"

"No." Marsh frowned. "He denies having had anything to do with that, or with any of the oil company sabotage. But his glasses were found right at the scene. He'll break down sooner or later and admit the whole thing."

"Suppose someone planted his glasses there?" demanded Parker.

"Don't tell me you don't believe him guilty!" Lieutenant Marsh looked at Parker in amazement.

"Oh, I believe he's an enemy agent all right—a miserable traitor deserving the harshest penalty a democracy can mete out," Parker said. "But neither he nor the spies he harbored may have anything to do with the oil disasters. I can't give you any details yet, but I believe I know the real answer to that, Lieutenant. Listen! Are there any small refineries located near Lownesville?"

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farmer, Mr. Carridine," said Parker. "Just what does that mean?"

"Insect control is my chief hobby," Carridine said. "In these hothouses I expose various grains and vegetables to the ravages of the insects that normally attack them, then watch the effects of sprays and insecticides under varying conditions. A couple of young scientists do most of the work. We've developed several new and successful control methods."

"The Monarch is losing millions!" exclaimed Bingham disgustedly. "And Carridine is worrying about bugs!"

Parker merely smiled as he climbed into his car and headed back toward Lownesville.

At State Police Headquarters young Lieutenant Marsh had some interesting news.

"We traced those glasses you found at the scene of the train wreck to Fenster," said Marsh. "The F. B. I. men have taken over. They kept grilling him about the hot coffee pot you found in the schoolhouse basement. At last they broke him down. He admitted being a paid Nazi agent."

"I thought he might be!" exclaimed Parker.

"That hunting club was a front for a regular underground railway system," said the lieutenant. "Fenster was harboring saboteurs presumably landed by submarine along the Atlantic Coast. G-men caught the one who was there when you came. He was hiding in an old shed a few miles away. They got a full confession from Fenster. He's American-born, but had a record with bund-

"A few," Marsh said. "Once they tried to make a refining center out of Lownesville. But it didn't pan out. The pipe-lines spoiled it. They're still operating on a small scale. Some of them have been getting defense orders, putting old machinery back into shape."

Parker took out a road map and asked Marsh to show him where these refineries were. The lieutenant indicated three, all located along the railroad.

"Sure there aren't any others?" Parker asked.

"You mean you want to go have a look at them?" Marsh said. "Well, let's see. Yes, there is one other, up north of here where some oil deposits played out. The rail spur up there was abandoned years ago. I believe that property was sold recently. Man from out of town bought it—seems he had a refining business somewhere else, got a Government contract, and needed more room. Afraid I don't remember his name, though. All I know about it is what I saw in the local paper."

Parker picked up the phone and called Greenwood at the Lownesville Gazette. When he hung up he told Marsh:

"John Creedon, a New Yorker, bought it. I think I'll pay Mr. Creedon a little visit—alone." Parker glanced at his watch. "If I shouldn't get in touch with you before this evening, maybe you'd better send somebody out to see what's happened to me."

"You sound as if you expect to run into trouble," said the lieutenant.

"I often do!" Parker said dryly.

CHAPTER XI

The Old Pipe-Still

PETER V. GORDON,
Oil Geologist

HALF an hour later Rex Parker drove along a mud-rutted street in the ramshackle, half-abandoned little village of Wago, northeast of Lownesville.

In front of a fly-specked restaurant a shiny new station wagon was parked. On one door was painted:

CREEDON REFINING COMPANY

He parked and got out. A man who was beefily built and needed a shave was sitting just inside the door on a barrel, smoking a pipe.

"I'd like to see Mr. Creedon, please," Parker said to him.

The guard took out his pipe. "He's in New York."

"Let me see whoever is in charge then," Parker said.

"Sorry, you can't. This is a defense plant." The guard had been studying Parker. "Say, you're not from around here, are you?" he asked.

"No, I'm from New York," said Parker. "Then maybe it's something important." The guard got to his feet. "I'll call Mr. Gargano. He's in charge."

As Parker stepped through, the guard padlocked the wooden door on the inside with a casual air.

"Wait here," he said.

Rex Parker knew he was plunging headlong into danger. This was the refinery he had been seeking. All doubt was dispelled when he saw the new black sedan beneath a shelter beside the gate.

The right rear tire had a diamond tread!

Parker smiled grimly. Time had been too precious for him to wait and attempt to enter the refinery under cover of darkness. But frequently he had found it necessary to walk directly into the hands of his enemies and depend on his wits to get him out. It was part of his self-appointed duty.

The guard reappeared with a narrow-shouldered man with a swarthy face and

heavy black hair. The man eyed Parker guardedly.

"I'm Gargano," he said. "What did you want?"

It was clear to Parker that these men had been informed of his presence in Lownesville and had been told to watch for him.

He gave his name and explained to Gargano that he was a sabotage expert. In view of the Monarch disasters he wanted to discuss preventive measures with all oil companies in the vicinity.

"Yeah, well you can discuss 'em with me, seein' Creedon ain't here," the swarthy man said.

"I thought perhaps I might look over your plant," Parker said.

"Sure, sure, we'll look over the plant," agreed Gargano. "Come on."

He led the way across a yard filled with distilling machinery, most of it rusty and apparently in poor condition. However, smoke was issuing from the stacks and workmen were moving about.

IN A long, newly-built shed to the rear Parker saw a long line of new tank trucks. He pointed toward some curious-shaped machinery connected by piping.

"I suppose I should learn more about the refining business," he said. "What are all these machines?"

"We got everything here," Gargano said. "Bubble towers, condensers, strippers, clay towers, agitators. Some of the stuff isn't so good, but it works."

"Have you any pipe-stills?" Parker asked.

"Nope. All old-fashioned shell-stills."

"Could you show me one?"

Gargano glanced at him sharply. "I sure could," he said. "Follow me."

There was no turning back now. Besides, there was more Parker needed to know.

"Right through this doorway," Gargano said. "It's on the other side of the fire wall. Better duck low—you'll catch your hat."

Parker started through and a swift push caught him between the shoulder-blades.

"Get in there, you!" Gargano's voice was a low snarl. "You're gonna find out plenty about shell-stills before we're through with you!"

Parker found himself in a bricked-in enclosure with a metal roof—a storage shed of some sort. In the dim light he saw four men standing silently around the walls. Each had a gun. A fifth gun, in the hand of Gargano, was boring into Parker's back.

Gargano stepped around in front of his prisoner with a contemptuous smile.

"You certainly fool easy, Parker," he said. "At first I thought maybe you was smart."

Two men had come up behind Parker and were frisking him. They took one gun from his sleeve holster and another from beneath his left arm. One of the men handed the two automatics to Gargano.

"Here's his artillery, Boss," he said.

Gargano smirked. "Parker wants to see a shell-still. Think you can fix him up, Lacy?"

"Sure," Lacy said. "That one we're lighting up tonight."

"Let's light it now," said Gargano. "The Ferret's orders were plenty clear about this lug. He's been messing around too much and the big boss wants him out of the way. We can get rid of his crate later. But we gotta do a clean job on him. Somebody might come out here looking for this guy."

Lacy moved his gun suggestively. "Maybe we ought to bump him now."

"A shot might be heard in the village," Gargano grinned evilly. "Anyway, why waste bullets on this lug? Just tie his hands."

The five men closed in, and Parker's wrists were quickly bound behind his back. A door at the rear of the brick enclosure was opened, and he saw a shell-still—a huge horizontal steel cylinder, held six or eight feet off the ground by rectangular brick walls.

"That still was built for coal, but we fixed it over so it burns oil instead," Gargano said casually. "But the coal pit is still there. When we light up the oil fire, it'll get pretty hot in that coal pit."

Parker's eyes narrowed. The prospect of being roasted alive was not one to be considered with relish.

GARGANO opened the heavy iron doors at the bottom of the still. Before Parker loomed a dark space, lined with fire brick and floored by huge iron grates. The more modern oil-burning mechanism took up only a small part of the space.

"He's takin' this pretty cool, Gargano," Lacy said. "Maybe he's got some idea for bustin' out of here when we light 'er up. How about tying him to one of them pipes over there?"

"All right," Gargano said. "Get inside there, Parker. Over in the corner."

Again Parker felt the prod of a gun in his back. He bent over and stepped into the low furnace doorway of the still.

All five men followed Parker in through the door. Lacy snapped on a flashlight. Its rays lit up the gloomy cavern lined with crumbling fire brick. The ceiling was formed by the cylindrical tank, so that though they had been forced to bend low at the middle of the curving steel surface there was plenty of headroom at the sides.

Gargano steered Parker toward a vertical pipe at the rear corner.

"Do your stuff, Ringo," he muttered.

The gangster called Ringo retied Parker's wrists, lashing them securely to the pipe with the rope. Then Parker spoke with apparent casualness.

"As I remember, Gargano," he said, "it's customary in cases like this to let the victim make a last statement."

"Want to send love and kisses to your

sweetie?" Gargano growled.

"If you're smart, Gargano," said Parker, "you'll listen to what I've got to say."

The gangster hesitated, his eyes narrowing with suspicion.

"All right, spill it."

"It concerns the newspaper for which I work—perhaps you've heard of the Comet. You're from New York, aren't you?"

"Sure. I know the paper. So what?"

"So this morning I wrote a long letter to the managing editor of the Comet, telling all I had learned so far, and that I was going to visit the Creedon Refinery this morning."

"Okay," said Gargano. "So you were here and went away again."

"I hadn't mailed that letter yet," said Parker. "I intended to add more to it tonight. But that letter is going to be found sooner or later and the facts relayed to the Comet."

"And then what?" demanded Gargano defiantly.

"Then the F. B. I. will get busy. If you don't get yours from them you'll get it from the Ferret, for bringing the Law here."

"Nice bedtime story, Parker," said Gargano, but he sounded worried. "Still, you've got sense enough to know I can't let you out of here alive now."

"I'll make a deal with you," Parker stared at Gargano. "I don't much like the idea of being roasted alive. Leave me my gun so I can use it on myself when it gets too hot."

Gargano hesitated. "Are you on the level about that letter?" he asked.

"Why not find out? You've got nothing to lose. I'll give you the key to my hotel room in Lownesville. Look in the drawer of the writing desk and you'll find a letter addressed to the managing editor of the Comet."

Gargano looked at Parker through narrowed eyes.

"This better be on the level," he said harshly. "All right, men, we're going over there." He got the hotel room key out of Parker's pocket. "Ringo, you keep an eye on this wise guy. If this is a trick, Parker, you'll be plenty sorry."

THEY went out and Parker heard the dull clang as the furnace doors closed. Ringo lounged against one wall, a flashlight in one hand and a gun in the other, both pointed at Parker.

"You try any tricks that'll get me in hot water, and I'll blast your liver out," Ringo said.

Parker grinned at him. "What do you expect me to do—the Indian rope trick?"

"Better not try it," said Ringo sullenly.

"All right, if you'll turn that cannon of yours the other way so it doesn't accidentally blow my head off, I'll give you my word not to pull this six-inch pipe out by the roots and plow through a two-foot-thick brick wall."

"None of that smart talk, either," Ringo muttered. "It won't get you nowhere with me."

He kept his gun leveled.

But after a few minutes his arm appeared to grow tired, and the gun began first to waver and finally to sag.

To outward appearances Parker was standing perfectly still, but behind his back his hands were engaged in a feat upon which his life depended.

Hours of practical study had taught Rex Parker how to offer his wrists to be tied. When he had allowed himself to be fastened to the pipe, he had kept his muscles rigidly tense and his fingers outspread a little. While apparently holding his hands close together behind his back, there had been a small space between them.

Now when he relaxed his wrists, there was play in the rope.

While talking with Gargano, his wrists had kept up a constant movement, straining, tugging at the rope. Gradually he felt it stretch and yield, but his wrists were worn raw and the muscles tensed and strained almost to the limit of endurance.

As Ringo's gun dropped lower, he saw his chance. Contracting his hands until they were scarcely broader than his wrists, he gave a low steady pull. The rough rope rasped the skin off his knuckles, but he felt his hands slipping through.

And then Ringo realized what he was trying to do.

"Hey, what—" he began.

He never knew exactly what happened or how it happened then.

All he could see was that his prisoner's hands were free and there was a gun in one of them.

Ringo fired, as Parker ducked to one side. There was a roar from the gun in the hand of the prisoner. Ringo sank to the floor with a neat hole between his eyes.

Parker bent over and picked up his hat from the floor to which he had let it fall—for a purpose. There was nothing new about concealing a gun in his hat. Realizing that he was going into danger and might be captured and disarmed he had put the little .22 caliber pistol in his hat while waiting in the yard for the guard to return. For he had recalled that in the many times he had been frisked in his life, rarely did anybody bother about his hat.

"Better get out of here in a hurry," he thought. "Gargano and his gang are going to be plenty mad when they get back—since they won't be able to find a nonexistent letter."

To his relief he managed to reach his car without being discovered, and drove away in a hurry. He was careful not to use the same road that Gargano and the rest would probably take in coming back from Lownesville. There would be plenty of time to face them—later.

CHAPTER XII

Scarred Captor



PARKER finally reached the hotel in Lownesville, and discovered that Winnie Bligh had already arrived. When he knocked on her door, she opened it and greeted him with a smile.

"Rex!" she exclaimed. "Where have you been? I asked for you and the clerk told me you hadn't been seen around the hotel for some time."

"Well, here I am," said Parker, with an answering smile. "All in one piece, in spite of what almost happened at the Creedon Refinery a while ago. I'll tell you about that later . . . What did you find out in New York, Winnie?"

Winnie told him about how she and Cynthia Fairfield had been kidnaped. Parker interrupted her so often she finally made a face at him.

"Am I telling you what happened, or are you trying to interview me?" she asked.

Parker shrugged. "Go ahead, Sweet."

"I talked to Sergeant Gleason long distance a few minutes ago," Winnie went on. "He's found no trace of Cynthia yet. Whether Henry Fairfield turns out to be the Ferret or not, she's certainly not one of the Ferret's gang, and I feel responsible for her. I led her straight into her kidnaper's hands. They must have been waiting for just such a chance, though why, I can't imagine. I guess I was more than they bargained for, though—which was why I got away as I did."

"Fairfield doesn't appear any too fond of his daughter," Parker said thoughtfully. "Just why he told Gleason that hokey about her having left to visit friends in Canada I don't know, unless—"

"Unless what?" demanded Winnie, as he paused.

"Fairfield might know his daughter is in danger and has been warned not to talk. . . . But that black book you picked up where they were holding you a prisoner. Have you got it with you?"

"Yes." Winnie drew it out of her handbag. "It contains a list of names. No addresses."

"A regular rogues' gallery," muttered Parker as he looked through the book. "Tony Scarponi, Mickey Orcutt, Steve D'Andrea, Louie Lyon, Jimmie Dyer, Frankie Fargis—they're all listed here. More than a hundred names."

"But why Rex?" asked Winnie.

"Fargis—he's a big shot in the protection racket," Parker said. "Lyon runs the East Side numbers game, although they've never pinned it on him. Seems to me that Tony

Scarponi has served time for dope smuggling."

"Do you think all of these crooks are mixed up with the Ferret's gang?" demanded Winnie, excitedly. "We must have stumbled onto the biggest racket in history. All this sabotage . . . Could they be tying up with some foreign power against the Government?"

Parker shook his dark head slowly. "No, I don't think so. But they are certainly mixed up in this thing, and if we can smash the higher-ups, we can get them, too."

"Then what do we do now?" asked Winnie.

"See if we can get some lunch," said Rex Parker practically.

They ate a fairly good meal, and spent the afternoon establishing themselves as reporters from the New York Comet working on the Monarch Petroleum oil train wreck. At State Police Headquarters they had a talk with Lieutenant Marsh. The officer appeared relieved when he saw Parker.

"I was afraid you might run into trouble at the Creedon Refining Company," he said.

"I did," said Parker, and told exactly what had happened at the refining plant.

"I guess the State Police better raid the Creedon Refining Company right away," the lieutenant said, grim-lipped, when he had heard the reporter's story.

"No, not yet." Parker shook his head.

"Leave the place alone until I've had a chance to investigate there further."

"You're crazy!" exclaimed Marsh. He looked at Winnie. "He barely escaped with his life and he's going back for more!"

"I think you're quite right, Lieutenant," agreed Winnie, with a demure side glance at Parker. "There are times when he does seem quite crazy."

PARKER glared at her but said nothing until they were outside.

"Just for that crack to the lieutenant," he told her then, "you're going to spend a nice lonely evening in this town while I pay another visit to the Creedon Company, Cap'n Bligh."

"I knew it!" wailed Winnie. "Why didn't I keep my mouth shut!"

Parker drove Winnie back to the hotel, they had dinner, and around eight o'clock he drove alone to the little village of Wago. He parked where he could see the refinery towers against the gray night sky and approached the brick wall on foot.

From the shadows across the road, he peered toward the little wooden door beside the heavy gates. He could just see a man sitting inside on a barrel. A pipe was drooping from his mouth.

"Looks like my pal," muttered Parker. "The guy who let me in before and called

[Turn page]

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Gargano." He moved back. "Well, no chance getting in this way with him on the job."

He headed back along the road until he was sure he was out of sight, then ducked quickly around the corner of the wall and kept going.

There ought to be some other way to get in to the refinery.

The wall was a good ten feet high, with barbed wire strung along the top. It was unsalable without cleats or a rope. There were doors at intervals, but all were heavily barred.

The wall enclosed a space the size of several city blocks. Parker walked the entire length, until he was nearly back where he started, without finding any possible way to get in.

He halted abruptly. The double gates were now open, and a big truck was swinging wide to turn. The lettering on the side read:

L. GABIN, PROVISIONS

Parker crouched down in some brush where he could watch the gates. That truck puzzled him. What provisions would be delivered to an oil refinery at nine o'clock at night.

As he sat there, the gates opened again to allow another truck to leave. On its side was:

BROWN & SON, Poultry and Eggs

What was this? Were they running an oil refinery or a restaurant?

After about twenty minutes he saw another truck leaving through the gates—a lumbering old vehicle, swinging wide and gathering speed slowly in the rutted road. On the side was painted:

C. THOMSON, Leather Findings

Parker ran along the deserted road, caught up with the truck, and swung up on back. The rear doors were locked. He had to cling to a short length of padlock chain and stand on a two-inch ledge where he could clearly be seen. He hoped no one from the refinery had noticed.

Apparently no one had. There was no alarm, and the truck was gathering speed.

At first Parker's problems were confined to hanging on as the truck speeded up to a constantly faster pace. Then dust from the big wheels, whipped up in the truck's wake, began to bathe him from head to foot. It filled his hair, ears, eyes, and choked him so that he could hardly breathe.

At the end of an hour with no let-up, he began to cough and was afraid his grasp on the chain would slip. Where was the truck heading?

A loud report sounded. A shot!

Holding the chain by one hand, Parker swung around, reaching his shoulder gun.

BUT there was no car behind the truck. They were passing through hilly waste country. Where could a shot have come from? He realized that the truck was slowing rapidly, then it dawned on him what had made the report he had heard. A flat tire. He was sure to be discovered.

The instant the truck stopped he leaped off, and threw himself behind a clump of brush.

He heard muttered conversation between the two men who had been in the driver's seat, but could not distinguish their words. Then they set to work to put on a new tire. Once more the truck rumbled into motion. Parker darted from his hiding place, caught the chain, and pulled himself up on the back of the truck.

As the vehicle rumbled on he noticed a blur of light behind them on the highway. It developed into two headlights which kept drawing closer.

"I thought I was getting away with this too easily," he muttered disgustedly.

So far he had been lucky, for there had been little traffic and the truck had swiftly outdistanced what there was. But with the car behind gaining rapidly on the truck, Parker held his breath. The lights drew close up. They kept blinking, dim to bright, then Parker found himself in the direct rays of a spotlight.

The truck behind veered suddenly, and the driver blew his horn. Parker's driver slowed down. There were shouts. Brakes squealed on both trucks.

Rex Parker knew he was in for it. He dropped to the road, running as fast as he could make his legs go, veering off toward the darkness at the side of the highway.

But he had run no more than a dozen paces when he was sent sprawling on his face. He struggled to his feet to find himself surrounded by four roughly dressed men, two of whom had guns in their hands. A flashlight beam shot in his face.

"Hitch-hiker, huh?" he heard a surly growl. "Get over here in the light where we can look you over."

Rough hands pushed him into the glare of headlights. He tried to fight, and a gun barrel thumbed him on the head. It left him dazed, but not completely out.

"This ain't no hitch-hiker, Pete," he heard a harsh voice growl. "This is that Rex Parker guy!"

"Parker!" exclaimed another man. "The lug who bumped Ringo! Yeah, we'll take him along."

Parker was prodded along the road and forced to climb into the leading truck's front seat. After a while he was forced to the road again and was staggering through underbrush, a man grasping him by either arm. He could see the dim shapes of farm buildings, plowed fields.

He caught the words: "Look what we brought you, Gordon."

His brain cleared. Before him stood a heavy-set blond man with a scar through one eyebrow. He wore khaki breeches and coat. He stared at Parker with cold, appraising eyes.

"Who is he?" he asked.

"Rex Parker, that reporter from the New York Comet, who brags about being a crime investigator," one of the truckmen said.

THE blond man smiled mirthlessly.

"Well, make yourself at home, Mr. Parker. You may be with us for some time."

"We'll put him in the shack, huh, Gordon?" asked a truck driver.

"By all means," Gordon said softly. "And perhaps we could find some nice strong wire out somewhere to tie his hands and feet. Come to think of it, there's some in the wagon."

He strode over to a new station wagon drawn up beside one of the buildings. In the dim light Parker saw the inscription on its side:

PETER V. GORDON,
Oil Geologist

Gordon returned with some wire, and while they were binding Parker, the weird scene was etched in his brain as in a nightmare—tumble-down farm buildings, a freshly plowed field although it was late autumn, the dim shapes of the provision trucks, ghost-like in the background, hard-faced men, their features distorted in the flickering glare of kerosene lanterns.

With his wrists and ankles wired he was carried through a doorway and placed on a hard cot. He heard the men going away. A door closed and he was left in darkness.

CHAPTER XIII

Parker Explains



FOR what seemed hours Rex Parker remained motionless on the hard cot staring into the black darkness. It was impossible for him to release his wrists from the wire as he had with the rope at the Creedon Refinery. The thin copper strands held fast.

His brain worked busily as he sought some means of escape. If he only had something with which to cut that wire! While his guns had been taken from him, his other possessions were still in his pockets. He considered each one as a possible aid to freeing himself.

"Wallet, keys, money, handkerchief, fountain pen, pencil, nail clippers," he thought. "Nail clippers—that's it. I can cut the wire with those clippers, if I can get at them."

The clippers were in his lower vest pocket. He rolled over face-down on the cot and patiently wiggled around until he finally succeeded in working the clippers out.

It took time but he finally got them open and in his fingers behind his back, as he lay on his side.

One by one he cut through the strands of wire around his wrist, until at last his hands were free. He sat on the edge of the cot, and risked using his flashlight to cut the wires on his ankles.

He got staggeringly to his feet and went to the closed door. It was not locked. He drew it open a crack and peered out. No one was in sight.

The provision trucks were gone and no cars were around. A faint light that gleamed through a window on the lower floor of the old farmhouse was the only sign of life about the place.

Parker stole out of the shed and made his way toward the farmhouse as silently as a fitting shadow. Reaching a spot where he could peer in through the lighted window, he crouched there. The lower sash was raised and he could plainly hear the voices of the men inside the living room.

Parker's gaze centered on a stocky, pleasant-faced man with hard eyes who was talking to some other men—rough-looking men.

"I guess we pulled that railroad job clean enough for you, huh, Lanning?" the reporter heard one of the men say, plainly addressing the stocky man.

"What makes you think that, Lacy?" Lanning's voice was cold.

"We turned that train into a junk pile and made a clean getaway, didn't we? What's eatin' you, Creedon?"

"Call me Lanning, you fool," snapped the stocky man. "And about that train wreck. It was planned for one purpose only, which was carefully explained to you. In that purpose it failed completely, through your negligence. As a result this fellow Parker showed up at the refinery this afternoon, learned enough to make him suspicious, and managed to get away."

"Aw, how were we to know he'd get free and bump off Ringo?" demanded Gargano. Parker recognized him. "He bluffed me by a lot of hokey about having written a letter to his paper and leaving it in his hotel room. Anyway we've got him again now."

"But the Ferret doesn't like it," said Lanning. "State troopers and G-men may raid the refinery any time. They won't find much there now, but it's bad."

"Then what are we supposed to do now?" demanded Gargano.

"There's too much big dough at stake to let them queer our game," said Lanning. "I talked to the Ferret over the phone this afternoon, and we both agreed we'd have to jump the gun on Plan Number Eight. I've got his orders on the dictaphone so you men will know he means business."

OUTSIDE the window Rex Parker watched and listened with interest as Lanning went to a mechanism against one wall. A loud-speaker wired to a dictaphone. Lanning touched the needle to the wax record.

From the loud speaker issued a rasping voice. Parker strained every sense in an effort to recognize that voice, but distortion made it impossible.

"This is the Ferret." The tone had a chilling intensity. "Plan Number Eight. You know the details. The time is tomorrow night at ten minutes after midnight. The plan must go through without a flaw. I have been too tolerant of your past mistakes. If you fail this time you cannot hole-up so deep that the Ferret will not find you and destroy you. That is all."

Dead silence fell over the room as Lanning removed the needle from the record.

"Are you sure we can count on Gordon carrying out his part of the plan?" John Sneed finally asked.

"Don't worry about him," said Lanning.

"What about the Fairfield dame?" demanded Gargano. "I don't like the idea of bein' mixed up in that snatch."

"I wouldn't tell the Ferret that if I were you," said Lanning. "After the way you slipped up with Parker you're not so popular with him right now."

Outside the window Parker whirled as he heard a slight sound behind him. A man in overalls and with a gun in his hand was lunging toward him. Parker hurled himself forward in a flying tackle, caught the man around the knees and brought him crashing to the ground.

Before the fellow could recover Parker snatched the would-be attacker's automatic and brought the gun barrel down hard on the man's head. The truck driver lapsed into unconsciousness.

Gun in hand Parker swung in through the open window, bringing startled shouts from the men in the room. Gargano jerked out his gun. Parker squeezed the trigger of the automatic.

Gargano yelled in pain. His gun dropped to the floor and he bent over, hugging his wounded right arm.

"Get him!" shouted Lanning, backing toward the door. "It's Parker! He's loose again!"

Parker's left hand caught the back of a straight chair and he swung it over his head, crashing it into the old-fashioned oil lamp on a table.

In the instant darkness two guns began blazing at the spot where Parker had been, but he had leaped quickly to one side. He fired, and heard the thud of a falling body. Flame lanced out of a corner as a gun roared, and he felt the bullet whistle by his ear.

Then from outside came the roar of car motors and the sound of authoritative voices.

"State Police!" shouted Lanning's voice.

"Beat it—quick!"

There was the sound of running feet, and a door slamming. Then guns started roaring all over the house. The gang was trying to fight it out with the police. Parker stood motionless, straining his ears in the effort to learn if someone was still waiting to get him in the darkness of the room.

From every direction it sounded like an old-fashioned Fourth of July, with plenty of fireworks. But Parker could hear no one in the room. Then abruptly the firing ceased. State Police, led by Lieutenant Marsh swarmed into the house, guns and flashlights in their hands.

PARKER stood motionless as Marsh flashed a light on him.

"Parker!" exclaimed the lieutenant. "Looks like you've been having a busy time of it."

"It's a good thing for me you fellows showed up here right now," Parker said, and grinned wryly. "How come?"

"You can thank Miss Bligh," said Marsh. "She was worried about you and called me, to tell me you'd taken another fool chance of looking over the Creedon Refinery alone. I drove her out to the refinery. Nobody was there, but we saw a truck leaving the place and trailed it here."

"How long ago?" asked Parker.

"About an hour," said the lieutenant. "Long enough for me to round up the men I brought here to raid this place. Quite a party we've had, too. We've captured all the gang of this Ferret friend of yours who weren't shot and killed in the fight. With the exception of one carload that got away."

A trooper picked up the oil lamp and succeeded in getting it burning again. Parker's eyes lighted up as Winnie Bligh appeared in the doorway.

"Umm," she said. "I thought you might be around, Rex, when I first heard the shooting."

"Looks like we've got the men behind the oil sabotage, all right," said Lieutenant Marsh, complacently.

"It isn't sabotage," Parker said. "It's a vicious, well-organized racket, run by an utterly unscrupulous American who intends to pile up a fortune while our boys on the fighting fronts go without fuel for their trucks, tanks and planes!"

"A racket?" echoed the lieutenant. "But how?"

"The Ferret, as he calls himself, the man who organized the racket, knew it would be a daring, dangerous enterprise with many chances of failure unless the plan could be ruthlessly carried out," said Parker. "If he succeeded millions could be made before the authorities got so hot on his trail that he was forced to abandon the scheme."

"What scheme?" demanded Winnie.

"A childish, simple plan. Through the Eastern states there are hundreds of crooks

and racketeers—perhaps thousands—who would be rationed down to a minimum in gasoline, along with everyone else." Parker smiled wryly. "And you know smugglers, dope runners, bandits, collectors for protection rackets and numbers games must have their gasoline. The Ferret's plan was to steal it from pipe-lines and bootleg it at a nice fat price—say fifty cents a gallon."

"But what made you suspect that?" demanded Marsh.

"Miss Bligh didn't realize it, but she stumbled onto definite evidence for me," said Parker. "She found a book that was a customer list—presumably the 'sales' that one gangster alone had made—sales for the 'service' as a whole."

WINNIE was startled.

"So that's what that list of names meant!" she exclaimed.

"There may be a dozen other such books in the hands of other members of the gang," Parker said calmly. "Apparently each canvassed whatever contacts he could make."

"But how did they work it?" demanded Lieutenant Marsh.

"I believe it will be discovered that the plan operated by means of a password, given to the crooked attendant of some gas station. When he was assured the customer was okay he'd take the customer's ration book, return it without tearing anything off, and no one would notice anything out of the ordinary."

"Station attendants are in on this scheme!" exclaimed Marsh.

"They'd have to be," said Parker. "And no doubt pocket a commission on every gallon sold. The gasoline comes from Creedon's refinery in Lownesville, in regular trucks, and is put into Creedon's own tanks."

"He already had a retail business built up. But where legitimate refiners, loaded down with defense orders, are limited in the amount of crude oil they can get for private use, Creedon keeps his tanks full with gasoline from stolen crude, to be sold at bootleg prices. It's not too difficult to tamper with some retail pumps so they don't show the total amount sold."

"But you speak about stealing oil from pipe-lines as though it were a simple matter," protested Marsh. "I should think it would be pretty difficult."

"It's clear enough that the Monarch pipes are being broken into and tapped—and by men who know the oil business. But the point is that oil is being stolen—drained from the pipes—which accounts for the changes in oil pressure and leakages."

"But gauges at each pump station measure the amount of oil passing through," said the lieutenant. "If they failed to tally and no bad leakages had seeped through to the surface, it would be apparent that oil was being stolen."

"Exactly," agreed Parker. "But by constantly tampering with the oil—letting it flow

a while, then blocking it—they created the illusion that the line was clogged. Maintenance crews were kept in confusion while the crooks drained off as much oil as they could cart away, and the whole shortage was attributed to leakage."

"That could be, all right," Marsh said thoughtfully. "And you think that young Carridine and his partner were killed because they discovered something?"

"Of course," Rex Parker nodded. "They must have stumbled on a spot near here where the gang was taking oil from the line. Their deaths were no accident. The go-devil stuck solid in the valve. They would have known oil was being stolen if they'd had a chance to investigate. So they were murdered."

"But how could they cart the oil away?" asked Winnie. "Without being caught?"

"By those provision trucks that have been traveling back and forth from here to the Creedon refinery," said Parker. "They're carrying crude oil from the pipe-lines in drums concealed inside the trucks. Twenty or thirty such trucks, in several trips, might bring in fifty thousand gallons or more of crude oil in a single night. And it all comes from this farm!"

"It certainly looks that way," agreed Marsh. "At least this place was obviously a headquarters for the Ferret's gang. He frowned. "Too bad that one car load of them got away before we could stop them." "How many got away?" asked Parker.

"Four or five," answered Winnie. "I had a glimpse of them. Two of them were carrying what looked like a body wrapped in a blanket."

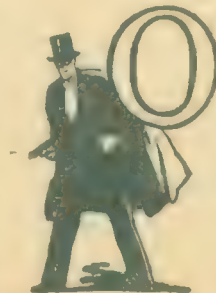
"And I'd be willing to bet that was Cynthia Fairfield," said Parker. "And if those men got away there is still a chance of them obeying the Ferret's orders and carrying out their Plan Number Eight."

"What's Plan Number Eight?" demanded Marsh.

"I don't know," Parker shook his head. "But we've got to stop them from carrying it out—and fast!"

CHAPTER XIV

Diabolical Plan Number Eight



OFFICIAL check-up on the members of the gang who had been captured or killed at the farmhouse showed that four of the Ferret's crew had managed to make their escape. From a wounded gangster it was learned that among them were Creedon, or Lanning, as he preferred to be called, a man named Peter Gordon, and Gar-gano and a fellow called John Sneed.

"The brains of the whole gang!" exclaimed Parker disgustedly. "And they all got away, taking the kidnaped girl with them!"

"We've got to find some way to save her!" Winnie pleaded. "That gang plans another disaster for the Monarch Petroleum tomorrow night, and—" She frowned. "What about these other things that have happened anyhow? What did the Ferret gain by blowing up the Monarch storage tanks in New York—and the train wreck?"

"The Ferret knew from the beginning that the oil thefts could not go on for long, in spite of his elaborate cover-up," Parker declared. "So his ruthless brain devised these disasters to keep the authorities occupied on false scents."

"You're right," agreed the lieutenant. "They cost the Ferret nothing but a few hundred pounds of dynamite, and gave the whole racket the appearance of being a sabotage plot."

Parker nodded. "Knowing that Fredric Fenster must be up to some mischief with his gun club, the Ferret tried to pin the whole thing on him. Nearly succeeded, too."

"It was carefully planned all right," said Marsh.

"The clipping I found burned in the hotel in New York," said Parker, "and which led me here was merely an item announcing a meeting of the Lownesville Hunt Club. So the Ferret chose their meeting night for the oil train wreck and contrived to steal Fenster's glasses and plant them. That wreck was a terrible thing, beyond conception almost, but I've an idea the Ferret's Plan Number Eight will be worse—a last desperate attempt to throw us off the scent and save his racket now that we're closing in on him. And he won't wait until tomorrow night!"

Lieutenant Marsh looked intently at Parker. "Evidently the sooner we get into action the better," he said grimly.

"There must be other places such as this along the pipe-line," said Parker. "Old farms they could use as they've been using this one."

"And I know the location of most of those places around here," said Marsh. "Want to look them over?"

"Now!" said Parker.

Winnie and Parker climbed into the lieutenant's sedan. Marsh took the wheel, and half an hour later they drove along a rutted country road to a small farm shack with a ruined barn.

Although the field between the pipe-line and the shack had been freshly plowed and farm machinery was in evidence, they could find no one around.

"Look at all these fresh tire tracks," Marsh pointed to them. "And I smell oil."

Parker headed for the barn. All the usual farm debris had been cleared away except in one corner where there was a pile of scrap iron and miscellaneous junk. He dived into this and uncovered a four-inch steel pipe

with a valve at the end, coming butt-upright out of the ground.

"This is it, Marsh!" he said excitedly. "The trucks back right into the barn and fill up."

"But there's nobody around here," said the lieutenant. "We'd better look up another one of these farms."

THE next place was somewhat larger, with a ruined stone house. There was no sign of occupants, but Parker discovered the oil pipe in a stable. They visited two other deserted farms, and at each found an oil pipe somewhere about the place.

At the fifth farm, smoke was issuing from the chimney of the farmhouse. Parker approached the front door alone.

A little bald-headed man opened it. Parker explained that he had been having trouble with his car and wondered if he could use the phone.

"Nope," came the reply. "We ain't got a phone."

"Sorry." Parker grinned apologetically. "Then maybe you happen to have a cup of coffee. It's chilly out."

"Yep. Got a cup of coffee. Come on in."

He swung open the door and Parker entered the old-fashioned living room. There was a bottle of whisky with a number of empty glasses near it on a table beside the lamp.

"I ain't supposed to let in anybody," said the little bald-headed man. "But I guess they won't be comin' here right away."

"Your family?" inquired Parker.

"No, them fellows that bought the place. They wanted it bad, but I wouldn't sell it less'n I could stay here. They said I could if I'd keep people off the place for 'em. My name's Calkins. What's yours?"

Parker said his name was Smith. As the old man began puttering around a kerosene stove Parker strolled casually about the room. In one corner he discovered a new radio set. It was a battery set, since there was no electricity in the vicinity. The radio was small but of expensive make. Tacked to the wall above it was a geological contour map of the sector.

"I'm interested in maps," he told Calkins.

"Where did you get this?"

"One of them fellers that comes here put it up—he's a geologist," said Calkins.

There were five dots on the map and they followed the location of the pipe-line. Each was obviously for one of the five farms. They were numbered respectively: 17, 26, 31, 35 and 37.

"Nice radio you have here," said Parker.

"Are there any special programs the men who bought the farm particularly like?"

"Yep," Calkins said. "News programs, specially the ones at seven and at eleven in the evenings." He glanced at an old clock. "Time for the eleven o'clock news now."

"I like to hear the news, too," said Parker.

He turned the power dial without moving the station selector. As with all battery sets, a voice sounded instantly:

"—so you can enjoy the many added benefits to your car. Laboratory tests recently conducted in Pittsburgh show that Monarch Super-Ethyl had seventeen per cent more pulling power on hills than any gasoline in its price class—"

The voice of the advertising announcer droned on. Parker paid no attention. He glanced up at the map and his gaze sharpened. He had heard Carridine listening to the same sort of announcement once before only then the man giving the commercial had said twenty-six per cent instead of seventeen and both those numbers were right there on the map before him.

NUMBER 26 was beside the farm where he had battled the gang, while 17 appeared to be a place he had not yet visited. He drank his coffee as swiftly as possible and left to tell Winnie and Lieutenant Marsh what he had found.

"That percentage number is the code," he said. "Granted that gasoline is being stolen from a different point nearly every night, truck drivers have to know where to go. The percentage number gives them the location of the farm by checking the number with the map. And we better head for Farm Number Seventeen right away."

They drove on westward. Marsh pointed off to the right.

"We're coming into the oil well country," he said. "Over there are some of the wells controlled by Monarch. They go south for several miles along both sides of that side road."

Rows of parallel rigs stood stark in the moonlight. Lights burned around the foot of some of them.

"These wells aren't Texas gushers," Marsh explained. "But they've pumped a steady flow of oil for years. Farther down are some new ones they've been drilling into deeper strata, though. One of them, the Monarch Nairn Number Two, struck a freak structural trap and is still flowing three or four thousand barrels a day. They've got a bonanza."

"Suppose we take a look at it, Lieutenant?" suggested Parker. "We can head for Farm Number Seventeen later."

They went on for about a mile and then Marsh stopped the car where a neatly painted sign on a new steel-wire fence read:

MONARCH NAIRN NO. 2

A rig of new timbers poked its nose toward the moonlit sky. Men were moving about inside the fence-guards to protect the Monarch's precious new money-maker.

Across the road the land continued its upward slope from the valley.

"Look!" cried Winnie abruptly, horror

in her voice.

Parker gazed up—and suddenly his blood froze. Half-way up the incline an old truck was perched, its hood pointed down the slope. The truck was beginning to coast slowly down the hill.

Ahead on the road two figures leaped into a car, which jerked into motion and disappeared into a side road.

The truck was gathering speed as it rolled straight down the hill. It would crash through the wire fence as if it were so much tinfoil and would go hurtling down against the structure of the giant oil well. A conflagration was inevitable!

Burning oil from the gusher might pour down the valley, ignite other wells. The wiring from the truck motor or the least spark caused by friction would touch it off, and thousands upon thousands of gallons of oil would be wasted! The guards would be helpless against the onrushing truck.

Again the Ferret had struck ruthlessly—an oil well fire to divert attention from the pipeline thefts.

"Stay here, both of you!" snapped Parker, leaping out of the sedan and racing madly toward the approaching truck.

Marsh started to follow, but Winnie caught his arm and held him back.

"He said for us to stay here!" she cried. "Rex usually knows what he is doing. We'd better obey."

As the swaying truck rolled closer Parker caught a glimpse of someone on the driver's seat. He saw blond hair, a face half covered with cloth. Cynthia Fairfield in a bedraggled white awning frock, was in that truck—bound and gagged and helpless!

Parker gritted his teeth. They were killing two birds with one stone—getting rid of the kidnaped girl and blowing up the oil well at the same time!

CHAPTER XV

Ferret's Finish



THE truck was less than a hundred feet away from Parker, gathering speed as it came hurtling toward him. There was a chance, a bare chance—

He was running downhill, glancing over his shoulder, changing his direction toward where the truck would come.

The front swished past him. He sprang forward.

His foot landed on the running board while his hand grazed the outside mirror and he grabbed it.

He got the door open and swung in beside the girl just as the big truck went bouncing across the road and crashed through the fence.

Parker tried to jerk the wheel to one side, but there was no way to budge the locked mechanism. The ignition, too, was locked. He tried the foot brake, then the handbrake, but they were too badly worn to hold the truck on the steep incline.

Cynthia Fairfield stared at him, her eyes wide with fright. Parker grabbed the opposite door. There was only one thing to do and he did it. He gave the girl a hard push that sent her rolling out into the soft grass.

The truck rolled on down. Parker was less than a hundred feet from the well, with nothing to prevent the crash and the resultant holocaust.

Grasping the shift lever with both hands, he grated the truck into first gear, praying the cogs wouldn't slip. There was a moment of wild grating and gnashing—but the cogs held. The truck jerked slower, then started to skid on the slippery grass.

Parker gripped the useless wheel and prayed. The well-rig was fifty feet away—then forty—then thirty. The guards were running for their lives before this monster gone berserk.

The rear end of the big vehicle was going sideward now. The truck slowed down a little. In the grass ahead was a broken piece of heavy steel drilling bit, carelessly left lying around.

The wheels on the downward side of the truck struck it, pushed it ahead—then it stuck fast in the mud. The truck reared over on two wheels and overturned with a crash. Parker leaped from the driver's seat unharmed.

The truck lay on its side less than ten feet from the well structure. That was the distance by which Parker had kept the well from being destroyed and avoided his own certain death!

Men were running toward the scene of the near-tragedy. Parker saw a gray-haired man rush to where Cynthia Fairfield was lying motionless in the grass beside the road. It was Henry Fairfield, and his face was drawn as he knelt beside his daughter.

Hastily Fairfield removed the gag and untied the girl. As he helped her to her feet it was evident that Cynthia was not badly hurt. Parker walked over to them.

"I—I owe you a lot for saving my daughter's life, Parker," Fairfield said brokenly. "I have been a fool! Not only have I worked against my nation and my people, aided their enemies, but I've made my own daughter the victim of my greed. If she had been killed I would have been responsible for her—murder! I almost lost her—already I'd lost her love and trust, because I believed my actions toward her essential for my own terrible purpose. To keep her from talking to anyone.

"I even went so far as to have everyone believe that her—mind was not quite right. So that if she talked—" He could not look at Cynthia who was gazing at him, wide-

eyed. He shrugged. "Well, she—she hates me now—"

"No—no, Dad!" Cynthia cried. Impulsively she flung her arms about him. "I love you! I thought you hated me! I—I just wanted to save you—from yourself!"

Parker stood motionless as Fairfield held the girl, choking a little. Winnie and Lieutenant Marsh neared, and Carridine and Bingham also were approaching. Fairfield held up his head and spoke firmly.

"I put aside patriotism for the sake of money," he said. "I will make a signed confession, and put myself in the hands of the police."

"In other words, you are ready to confess your relationship with the Japanese government," said Parker. "After you were ruined by the patent lawsuit, Mr. Fairfield, you still knew the secrets of the patent. You were broke—and what better market for a vital oil patent than the wily Japanese, already determined upon their policy of world domination?"

"They received you with open arms and paid you handsomely for showing them how to replace their old shell-stills with modern pipe-stills, to make octane gasoline rapidly enough to make war—on the United States. With the money they paid you, you returned to this country and bought out a controlling interest in Monarch Petroleum."

"I thought that gun I took away from Cynthia didn't come from Australia," said Winnie.

Lieutenant Marsh pushed forward.

"So Fairfield is the Ferret," he accused grimly, "and is still working with the Japs—sabotaging his own company. Maybe the Japs OWN Monarch Petroleum, through secret agreements with him! Maybe they gave him the money to buy it—to jeopardize our gasoline supply!"

"That's a lie!" snapped Fairfield angrily. "I've had no connection whatever with the Japanese since returning to America, and I know nothing whatever about the sabotage."

"I believe Mr. Fairfield is telling the truth," said Parker. "But I think the Ferret suspected such a connection and held Fairfield's daughter, believing that she could be forced to reveal it and bring the whole blame for the Monarch disasters onto her father's head."

"But I wouldn't talk!" cried Cynthia. "So they tried to kill me by putting me in that truck."

Rex Parker turned sharply to Cornelius Bingham.

"Bingham, why didn't you tell us what you knew about Fairfield and clear up the confusion and suspicion?"

The little insurance man squirmed nervously. "How would I know?" he muttered. Parker smiled at him mockingly.

"You and Fairfield met in San Francisco when you were loading cattle on the cattle boat on which he was sailing to Japan. You

recognized him from his pictures in the papers and saw the Tokyo labels on his suit-cases."

"What of it?" demanded Bingham defiantly.

"When he returned with stories about having made a fortune in Australia, you approached him. You forced him into getting you a big job with Mutual Underwriters under the threat that you'd tell what you knew—and your little scheme has made you a millionaire. But you, too, are innocent of any connection with the Monarch disasters."

Parker paused for a moment, then went on in a quiet tone:

"Over there stands the monster with the blood of many men on his hands, and the guilt of selling out his country's war effort to line his own pockets." Parker pointed directly at Alan Carridine. "There is the man who calls himself the Ferret!"

Lieutenant Marsh gazed blankly at Parker.

"You mean that?"

"Yes, I know what I'm talking about." Parker smiled grimly. "You may as well arrest him now."

"You'll do nothing of the sort!" defied Carridine. "The very idea is preposterous! Would I order my gang to kill my own son?"

"I've hardly been able to bring myself to suspect you for that reason," said Parker. "Until evidence began piling up too heavily against you. Then I was forced to conclude that you did not know that your son, learning the business, was in the maintenance department and might run into peril at the hands of your gang."

Parker looked with stern accusation at the president of the oil company.

"But as soon as I accepted the premise that you didn't suspect your son was in danger," he said, "things began to fall neatly into place, Carridine."

"Why should they?" demanded Carridine curtly.

"As president of the company you were on a salary, and probably you didn't have a large stock interest in the company. You were the most logical suspect in the death of the cab driver, Davison. You said you were talking to your secretary when he went out the window, but you could easily have slipped into the wash-room and back without being noticed. Bingham and Fairfield were making phone calls."

No one apparently noticed the station wagon that had driven up and was standing in the road some distance away.

"Your scheme was clever, Carridine," went on Parker. "You looked up an old pal of yours from your phony oil stock days—Vic Lanning, who calls himself Creedon in business—and the two of you worked it out together. This gas racket might have run for months before it was found out, and you must have been cleaning up thousands of dollars a week!"

Carridine's big face seemed pale, but the confident smile had not left it.

"You certainly do not deserve your reputation for cleverness, Parker," he said. "Why, you've been spouting mere theories."

"Theories? I'm afraid not, Carridine." Parker's eyes bored into those of the tall man. "There is tangible proof on your hands right now. The finely ground tobacco on that wash-room towel when the taxi driver was murdered might have been Bingham's snuff. But I think a comparison microscope will prove it to be insecticide—pure tobacco dust used for dusting some of the vegetables in your greenhouses!"

"Come on, Boss!" shouted Vic Lanning, as he and three hard looking men with guns appeared at the edge of the group. "Head for the station wagon! We'll get you out of here!"

Carridine ran for the wagon. Lanning and the other men backed toward it with guns ready. They reached it and climbed in. Parker and the others did not move until the station wagon started to roll away. Then Lieutenant Marsh cursed and drew his gun.

The service revolver roared, the bullet plowing into the back of the station wagon. From the vehicle then came a blinding flash and a deafening roar as the station wagon was shattered.

The watchers gazed at it in stunned amazement and horror.

"Evidently the gang was foolish enough to carry their explosives in that wagon," Parker said grimly. "I doubt that any of the Ferret's gang is still alive."

"What a horrible way to die!" moaned Bingham.

"Well, that finishes it, gentlemen," said Rex Parker. "There should be no more trouble for the Monarch Petroleum Company." He touched Winnie on the arm. "Shall we go back to town, Miss Bligh?"

"Of course, Rex," said Winnie. "And when we're alone I'll probably kiss you out of sheer relief."

Smiles followed them as Parker led her away.

Next Issue

THE DELICATE APE

A Complete \$2 Novel by DOROTHY B. HUGHES



King started pumping bullets, but

By
ROBERT BLOCH

DEATH IS A

CHAPTER I

Won't You Walk into My Parlor?

THE gate handle was rusty. I didn't want to touch it. But that was the only way of getting in, unless I wanted to climb the high walls and leave part of my trousers on the iron spikes studding the top.

I grabbed the handle, pushed the gate open and walked down the flagstone path to the house.

If I were a botanist, I'd have been interested in the weeds growing along that path. As it was, they were only something to stumble over. I ignored them and stared at the mansion ahead.

The Petroff house was not quite as big as a castle and not quite as old as Noah's Ark. It looked like the kind of a place the Phantom of the Opera would pick for a summer home.

As far as I was concerned, it was some thing to donate to the next scrap drive.

But that was none of my business. My business was to sneak inside and wangle old Petroff into giving me an interview about his art treasures. The Sunday supplement needed a feature yarn.

I walked up to the big porch, climbed the stairs, and jangled the old-fashioned door pull. Nothing happened, so I did it again. Same result. It looked as though the Butler's Union had pulled its man off this job.

KILLERS ON A RAMPAGE BRING A REIGN OF



Petroff only smiled and ran toward him

VAMPIRE

*A Baffling Complete
Crime Novelet*

Just for fun I edged over and turned the door-knob. As I did, I noticed a garland hanging down from the metal projection. It was a wreath of smelly leaves. Not a funeral wreath—just leaves.

That was none of my business, either. I was interested in whether or not the door was unlocked.

It was. So I walked in.

Why not? When Lenehan gave me the assignment, he told me it was a tough one. He had talked to old Petroff over the phone, and Petroff had refused to meet the press or drool over his art treasures.

I expected to be met at the door by a bouncer with a shotgun. But this was easy, and I took advantage of it. It wasn't polite,

but newspaper reporting isn't a polite occupation.

THE door swung shut behind me, and I stood in a long hallway. It was hard to see anything specific in the afternoon twilight, but I got a musty whiff of stale air, mothballs, and just plain age and decay.

It made me cough. I coughed louder, hoping to rouse my host.

No results. I started down the hallway, still coughing from time to time. An open door led into a deserted library. I ignored it, passed a staircase, walked on.

Behind the stairs was another door. I halted there, for a faint light gleamed from underneath it. I groped for the handle and

EERIE MYSTERY TO A SECLUDED ESTATE!

coughed again. Once more the cough was genuine—for hanging on the doorknob was another garland of those leaves.

Inside here the smell was terrific. Like a Bohemian picnic. Suddenly I recognized the odor. Garlic.

According to the stories going around, old Petroff was a bit of a screwball. But it couldn't be that he had turned the house into a delicatessen.

There was only one way to find out. I opened the door and walked into the parlor where the lamp burned.

It was quiet inside—quiet enough to hear a pin drop. In fact, you could tell which end hit the floor first; the head or the point.

But a pin had not hit the floor in this room. Petroff had.

He looked like his photo, all right. He was tall, thin, with black hair, curled and gray at the temples. A beaked nose and thick lips dominated his face.

He lay there on the floor, his nose pointing up at the ceiling. I got to his side in a hurry, and the floor creaked as I bent over him.

It didn't matter. The noise wouldn't bother him. Nothing would ever bother Igor Petroff again.

His hand was icy. His face was paper-white. I looked around for a mirror but didn't spot any. I pulled my cigarette case out and put it against his lips. The shiny metal clouded slightly. He was still breathing, at any rate.

Probably he'd had a stroke. I lifted his head and stared into his bloodless face. His collar was open. I felt for a pulse in his neck, then took my hand away, quick.

I stared down at his throat, stared down and saw the two tiny punctures in his neck, shook my head and stared again.

They looked like the marks of human teeth!

There was no use asking if there was a doctor in the house. I got up and dashed out into the hall to get to the phone. I got to it. I jiggled the receiver for nearly a minute before I noticed the dangling cord trailing on the floor. Whoever had bitten Petroff had also bitten through the cord.

That was enough for me. I made the two miles back to town in about ten minutes and five hundred gasps. I still had a gasp left in me when I ran into Sheriff Luther Shea's office at Centerville and knocked his feet off the desk.

"Accident out at the Petroff place!" I wheezed. "Get a doctor, quick!"

Sheriff Luther Shea was a fat little bald-headed man who seemed to enjoy keeping his feet on the desk. He put them right back up and scowled at me over his Number Elevens.

"What's big idea of bustin' in here? Who are you, anyhow?"

I faced my genial quiz-master without a thought of winning the sixty-four-dollar

question.

"Can't you hear?" I yelled. "Call a doctor! Mr. Petroff has been injured."

"Ain't no doctor in this town," he told me. "Now state your business, fella."

I stated it, but loud. He perked up his ears a little when I told him about Petroff, but he didn't take his feet off the desk until I flashed my press badge. That did it.

"No sense trying to find a doctor—nearest one's back in L.A.," he decided. "I'm pretty handy at first-aid. I'll get the car and we'll go out and pick him up."

Sheriff Shea banged the office door behind him, and I grabbed a phone. I got hold of Calloway right away and he promised to send the ambulance out to Centerville. Somehow, after having had a good look at Petroff, I didn't have much confidence in Sheriff Shea's "first-aid."

THEN I put through a call to the paper. Lenehan growled at me, and I barked right back.

"Somebody bit his throat? Say, Kirby—you drunk?"

I breathed into the phone. "Smell that," I said. "I'm cold sober. I found him lying on the floor with two holes in his neck. I'm still not sure he wasn't dead."

"Well, find out. Keep on this story and give me all you've got. We can hold three hours for the morning edition. Looks like murder, you say?"

"I didn't say a blame thing about murder!" I yelled.

"Come on, quit stalling!" Lenehan yelled back. "What's your angle on this?"

I lowered my voice to a whisper. "Confidentially," I said, "my theory is that old Petroff bit himself in the throat just for the publicity."

Lenehan apparently didn't believe me, because he launched off into a discussion of my ancestry that was cut short when Sheriff Shea appeared in the doorway. He wore a rancher's black Stetson and a shoulder holster. On him it didn't look good.

"Come on, fella," he said, and I hung up.

His rattletrap Chevy didn't deserve a C card, but we made time down Centerville's single street and chugged out along the highway.

"From the L.A. papers, huh?" he grunted. "Whatcha doing up at Petroff's?"

"My editor gave me an assignment to write a feature story about the art treasures of the Irene Colby Petroff estate. Do you know anything about them?"

"Don't know nothing, fella. When old man Colby was alive, he and the missus would come into town and do a little trading once in a while. Then he died and she married this foreign gigolo, Petroff, and that's the last we seen of them in town. Then she died, and since then the place has gone to pot. This business don't surprise me none. Hear some mighty funny gossip about what goes

on out at Petroff's place. All fenced off and locked up tighter'n a drum. Ask me, he's hiding something."

"I got in without any trouble."

"What about the guards? What about the dogs? What about the locks on the gate?" I sat up. "No guards, no dogs, no locks," I told him. "Just Petroff. Petroff lying there on the floor with the holes in his throat."

We rounded a bend in the highway and approached the walls of the Petroff estate. The setting sun gleamed on the jagged spikes surmounting the walls. And it gleamed on something else.

"Who's that?" I yelled, grabbing Sheriff Shea's arm.

"Don't do that!" he grunted. "Nearly made me go off the road."

"Look!" I shouted. "There's a man climbing up the wall."

Sheriff Shea glanced across the road and saw the figure at the top of the wall. The car ground to a halt and we went into action. Shea tugged at his shoulder holster.

"Stop or I'll shoot!" he bawled.

The man on the wall considered the proposition and rejected it. He turned and jumped. It was a ten-foot drop but he landed catlike and was scuttling across the road by the time we reached the base of the wall.

"After him!" Shea grunted.

The man ran along the other side of the road, making for a clump of trees ahead. I dashed along behind. The fugitive reached the grove a few steps ahead of me and I decided on a little football practice.

It was a rather ragged flying tackle, but it brought him down. We rolled over and over, and on the second roll he got on top. He didn't waste time. I felt powerful fingers dig into my throat. I tore at his wrists. He growled and twisted his neck. I felt his mouth graze my cheek. He was trying to bite me.

I got his hands loose and aimed a punch at his chin, but he ducked and pressed his thumbs in my eyes. That hurt. I aimed another punch, but that wasn't good either. By this time he had those hands around my neck again, and things began to turn red. The red turned black. I heard him growling and snarling deep in his throat, and his fingers squeezed and squeezed.

This was no time for Queensbury rules. I kicked him in the tummy. With a grunt of appreciation he slumped back, clutching his solar plexus.

He was not pretty. He wore one of those one-piece overall outfits, and between the spikes on the wall and the tussle, he'd managed to destroy its integrity. Patches of his skin showed through, advertising the need of a bath. His yellow hair was matted and hung down over his eyes, which was just as well. They were as blue as a baby-doll's—and just as vacant. His lips hung slackly, and he was drooling. A prominent goitre completed the ensemble.

"Why, it's Tommy!" said the Sheriff. "He's a little touched," he whispered, "but harmless."

He didn't have to tell me the kid was touched. That I could easily believe. But the "harmless" part I doubted. I rubbed my aching eyes and neck while Shea patted Tommy on the back.

"What were you doing on the wall, Tommy?" he asked.

Tommy lifted a sullen face. "I was looking at the bats."

"What bats?"

"The bats that fly at twilight. They fly out of the windows and you can hear them squeaking at each other."

I glanced at Sheriff Shea. He shrugged. "Ain't no bats around here except the ones in Tommy's belfry."

I took over. "What else were you looking at, Tommy?" I inquired.

He turned away. "I don't like you. You tried to hurt me. Maybe you're one of them! One of the bad people."

"Bad people?"

"Yes. They come here at night. Sometimes they come as men, wearing black cloaks. Sometimes they fly—that's when they're bats. They only come at night, because they sleep in the daytime."

Tommy was in full cry, now. I didn't try to stop him.

"I know all about it," he whispered. "They don't suspect me, and they'd kill me if they thought I knew. Well, I do know. I know why Petroff doesn't have any mirrors on the walls. I heard Charlie Owens, the butcher, tell about the liver he sends out every day—the raw liver, pounds of it. I know what flies by night."

"That's enough," said Sheriff Shea. "Whatever you know, you can tell us inside."

"Inside? You aren't going in there, are you? You can't take me in there! I won't let you! You want to give me to him. You'll let him kill me!"

Again, Shea cut him off. Grasping his arm, he guided the half-wit across the road. I followed. We made straight for the gate.

Shea halted. "Push it open," I said.

"It's locked."

I looked. A shiny new padlock hung from the rusty handle.

"It was open half an hour ago," I said.

"He always keeps it locked," Shea told me. "Usually has a man out here, too—a guard. And dogs in the kennels back of the

CHAPTER II

They Fly by Night

SHERIFF SHEA arrived, wheezing, and together we collared our prisoner and dragged him to his feet,

house." He eyed me suspiciously. "You sure you were up here, Mr. Kirby?"

"Listen," I advised him. "I was up here a little over half an hour ago. The gate was open. I went in and found Petroff on the floor. He had two holes in his throat and I'm not sure whether he was still breathing or not. I'll give you every explanation you want later, but let's go inside, quick. He may be dead."

Shea shrugged. He stood back and drew his revolver. The shot resounded, the lock shattered. I held Tommy tightly and pushed him through the gateway.

After that I took the lead. Up the steps, through the door, down the hall. It was slow going in the gathering twilight. We stumbled along toward the room behind the staircase.

"Here," I said. "Here's where I found him." I opened the door. The light was still on. I pointed to the floor. "Here," I said.

"Yeah?" grunted Shea. "Where is he?"

The room was empty. The rug was on the floor, but Petroff was not. I stared, and the room began to whirl. I took a deep breath and inhaled fresh air.

It was coming from the open French windows at the end of the room.

Of course! The windows were open. I had made some kind of a mistake. Petroff had been breathing. He had fainted, or something. After I left he recovered, went for a stroll on the porch beyond the open windows, and locked his gate. The holes in his throat. Maybe he'd cut himself while shaving.

I WAS a fool. A glance at Sheriff Shea confirmed the suspicion. He grinned at me.

But Tommy was not grinning.

"You were here before," he murmured. "You saw him lying here with holes in his throat."

"I—I made a mistake," I mumbled.

"No. When you were here it was still daylight. Now it's dusk. When you were here he was still asleep. But he comes alive at night."

"What do you mean? Who comes alive at night?"

"The vampire," he whispered. "He comes alive. And at night he flies. Look!"

Tommy screamed. His finger stabbed at the dusk beyond the opened windows.

We stared out into the night and saw the black shadow of a bat skimming off into the darkness, a mocking squeak rising from its throat.

In just a little while there was the devil of a lot of activity. The ambulance I had sent for finally arrived, and Shea had to stall them off with a trumped-up excuse about a fainting fit. Then Shea wanted to play detective and go over the place. Personally, I think he was dying to case the joint merely

to collect some gossip.

I won't bother remembering the bawling-out he handed me. I had to take it, too. After all, my story sounded pretty phony now.

Tommy was the only one who believed me. And his support was not much help. A half-wit's comments on vampires doesn't make good testimony.

While Shea handled the ambulance men, Tommy kept talking.

"Look at the garlic wreaths on the doors," he said. "He must have been trying to keep them out. They can't bear garlic."

"Neither can I," I answered. "And I'm no vampire."

"Look at the books," Tommy exclaimed. "Magic."

I stepped over to the built-in bookshelves. This time Tommy really had something. There were rows of blackbound volumes; musty, crumbling treatises in Latin and German. I read the titles. It was indeed a library of demonology. Where there's smoke there's fire.

But what did that prove. Occultism isn't a rare hobby on the Coast. I knew half a hundred crackpots who belonged to "secret cults," and down Laguna way there was a whole colony of them.

Still, I ran my eyes and fingers along the rows. One of the books on the lower shelf protruded a bit more than was necessary. It offended my sense of neatness. As I reached in to push it back, a card slipped out from between yellowed pages. I palmed it, turned around just as Sheriff Shea reentered the room.

"Come on," he sighed. "Let's get out of here."

Driving back to town, with Tommy wedged between us on the front seat, Shea gave me another going over.

"I don't understand all this monkey business," he declared. "I don't know what you were doing in that house in the first place. Least I can do is hold you on suspicion of illegal entry. As for Tommy here, he's liable to get booked on the same charges. I'm gonna see his folks about this. But what I want to know it—where's Petroff?"

"I shot him," I grinned. "But the bats flew off with his body."

"Never mind that," Shea snapped. "You smart-aleck reporters aren't tampering with the law down here. I'd like to get the D.A. in on this, but there's nothing to go on, yet. Maybe after I hold you on suspicion a few days you'll be ready to talk. I want to know how you cut those telephone wires, too."

"Now listen," I said. "I've got work to do. I'm willing to play ball on this thing and help straighten matters out. If Igor Petroff has disappeared and I'm the last man who saw him alive—or dead—that's important to me, too. The paper'll want the story. But I'm down here on an assignment. I've got to move around."

"No, you don't. Case I didn't mention it, you're under arrest right now, Mr. Kirby."

"That," I sighed, "is all I want to know." I eased the car door open gently and swiftly. We were going thirty, but I took my chances. I jumped and hit the road.

Shea swore. He brought the rattling Chevy to a halt, but by that time I was running along the ditch on the other side of the road. It was good and dark.

SHEA bawled and waved his revolver, but he couldn't spot me. Then he turned the car around and zoomed back up the road. I went into the field, kept going. In a few minutes the road was far behind me, and I headed across to the other side of the field and another dirt road running parallel.

Here I found the truck that took me back to L.A. I hopped off downtown, found a drug store, and called Lenehan at the office.

"Where in thunder are you?" he greeted me. "Just had this hick sheriff on the wire. He's bawling you're a fugitive from justice. And what's all this business about a disappearing body? Give."

I gave. "Hold the yarn," I pleaded. "I've got a new angle."

"Hold it?" yelled Lenehan. "I'm tearing it up! You and your disappearing Dracula! Petroff was drunk on the floor when you found him and you were drunk on your feet. He had the decency to wander off and sober up, but you're still drunk!"

I hung up.

Then I fished around in my pocket and pulled out the card I had snatched from the book in Petroff's library.

It was nicely engraved:

HAMMOND KING
Attorney at Law

I turned it over. A man's heavy scrawl spidered across the back read:

You may be interested in this volume on vampirism.
H. K.

The plot was thickening. Hammond King? I knew the name. A downtown boy. Wealthy attorney. What was the connection?

I called Maizie at the office.

"Hammond King," I said. "Check the morgue."

She got me the dope. I listened until she came to an item announcing that Hammond King was attorney for the Irene Colby Petroff estate. I stopped her and hung up.

It was eight o'clock. Not likely that Hammond King would still be at his office, but it was a chance worth taking. The phone book got me the number and I deposited my third nickel.

The phone rang for a long time. Perhaps he was going over a tort or something. Then a deep voice came over the wire.

"Hammond King speaking."

"Mr. King—this is Dave Kirby, of the Leader. I'd like to come over there and talk to you."

"Sorry young man. If you'll phone my office tomorrow for a more definite appointment—"

"I thought we might have a little chat about vampires."

"Oh,"

That stopped him.

"I'll be right over," I said. "So long."

He didn't answer. I whistled my way out of the phone booth, ordered a ham sandwich and a malted milk, disposed of same, and took a cab downtown.

The night elevator brought me to Hammond King's office. The door was open and I walked into one of those lavish lay-outs so typical of wealthy attorneys and impecunious booking agents.

I ignored the outer office and made for the big door marked "Private."

King was examining a bottle of Scotch with phony nonchalance.

My nonchalance was just as phony as I examined him.

He was a short, stocky man of about fifty-five. Gray hair and mustache to match. His eyes slanted behind unusually thick bifocals. He wore an expensive gray suit, and I admired his taste in ties. He looked like a hundred other guys, but he sent books on vampirism to his friends. You never know these days.

"Mr. Kirby?" he inquired, getting up and extending his hand. "To what do I owe this pleasure?"

"I told you over the phone," I said. "I'd like to have a little chat with you about vampires."

"Oh."

The phony nonchalance faded away and the hand dropped to his side.

"I'd rather have talked to Mr. Petroff about it," I continued. "Matter of fact, I dropped in on him this afternoon. But he wasn't there. That is, he was there, and then he wasn't. You know how vampires get restless about twilight."

"What do you mean?"

"You know what I mean, King," I said. "I just thought I'd warn you. In case anybody tries to bite you in the throat, it's your old client, Igor Petroff."

"How'd you know he was my client?"

"I know a lot of things," I told him, wishing it were true. "And what I don't know you'd better tell me, but fast. Unless, of course, you want it splashed all over the front page of the Leader."

"Let's be reasonable," Hammond King pleaded. "I'll be glad to help you all I can. Anything involving my client—"

The phone rang. King reached for the receiver, then drew his hand back.

"Pardon me, please," he said.

He got up and went into the outer office and shut the door.

CHAPTER III

The Bat's Kiss

I WOULD have given my left arm to know who King was talking to. But I didn't have to give my left arm. All I needed to do was reach out with it and gently pick up the receiver. Call it eavesdropping, if you wish. You do a lot of things in this business.

"Mr. King?" a girl's voice came over the wire. "This is Lorna Colby. I'm at the Eastmore Hotel, Room Nine-nineteen . . . No, Igor sent for me. He wanted to talk about a settlement on the will."

"Have you seen Petroff?" Hammond King barked into the phone at this end.

"No, not yet."

"Well, I'll be around in the morning, at ten. We've got to work fast, you understand? Something's happening that I don't like."

"What is it?" asked Lorna Colby.

"I can't talk now. See you tomorrow. Good night."

He hung up. I hung up. It was my turn to look at the Scotch bottle as he came in.

"Where were we?" he asked.

"You were just going to spill the beans," I said.

Hammond King smiled. "Was I? Lucky for me I got called away. I'm afraid I can't talk this matter over with you just at present. That call was from a client in Pasadena. I've got to take the train tonight."

I rose. One of his desk drawers was half opened. I reached in and scooped up a handful of garlic leaves.

"You had these left over from decorating the Petroff house, I presume," I told him. "Too bad you didn't think to put these on the French windows."

I slipped the garlic wreath into his hand and left the room. He stood there with his mouth open, giving a poor imitation of a stuffed moose.

I rode downstairs and walked around the corner and across the block to the Eastmore Hotel. I didn't bother to send my name up, but rode in person to the ninth floor. Nine-nineteen was down the hall to my left. I found the room and knocked on Lorna Colby's door.

There was no answer—except a sudden, ear-shattering scream.

I jerked the door-knob. The door opened on a tableau of frozen horror.

A blond girl lay slumped on the bed. Crouching above her was a shadowy figure out of nightmare. Its head was bending toward her neck. I saw lean, outstretched fingers claw down, saw the mouth descend—then the shadow straightened, turned, swooped across the room and out through the open window.

Lorna Colby lay there, clutching her throat and staring in wide-eyed terror. I stared, too. For the intruder had been Igor Petroff.

When I reached the window, the fire-escape outside was empty. Perhaps it had never held a figure. Perhaps I'd have done better to look for something flying in the sky.

I turned back to the bed. Lorna Colby was sitting up. There was still fear in her hazel eyes as she looked at me.

"Who are you?" she demanded.

I introduced myself. "Dave Kirby, of the Leader. You're Lorna Colby, of course?"

She nodded. "Yes. But how did you know? And what made you come here?"

"Hammond King sent me," I lied.

It was the right hunch.

"Then maybe you can tell me," she said, "what's wrong with my uncle? He sent me a wire to come down and talk about the estate. I waited to hear from him tonight. I was getting sleepy and lay down on the bed. When I opened my eyes again, he was in the room."

"Petroff?"

"Yes. You recognized him, too?"

I nodded.

"He must have come through the window some way. He just crouched over me, staring, and there was something wrong with his face. It was so white, but his eyes glared, and I couldn't look away. Then I felt his hands come down toward my neck, and I screamed, and then—"

I shook her, not gently. It was fun, but there was no time for amusement.

"Stop it!" I snapped. "Relax."

She cried a little. Then she sat up and fished around for her make-up. I took the opportunity to study her more closely.

LORNA COLBY was tall, blond, and about twenty-two. She had a good face and a better figure. All in all, the kind of a girl worth whistling after.

That noise like a ton of bricks was me, falling. She didn't notice it. After a while she patted her hair back and smiled.

"Your uncle is—ill," I said. "That's what Hammond King asked me to tell you. We're trying to keep things quiet until we can take him away for a rest."

"You mean he's crazy?"

I shrugged.

"I've always thought so," Lorna declared. "Even when Aunt Irene was alive, I knew there was something wrong with him. He led her an awful life."

She halted, bit her lower lip, and continued.

"After she died, he got worse. He kept dogs at the house, guarding it. He wanted to guard her tomb, he said. I haven't seen him now for almost a year. Nobody has seen him since the day she died. She had a heart attack, you know. He buried her in the private vaults on the estate. He wouldn't even let me see her or come to the funeral."

"I knew he hated me, and it came as a

surprise when I got his wire yesterday, asking me to come down from Frisco to talk about the will. That didn't make sense, either. After all, Aunt Irene left him the whole estate, even though he can't touch the money for a year."

Something clicked into place. I decided to follow it up.

"By the way, who was your aunt's physician?" I asked.

"Dr. Kelring."

"I'd like to talk to him," I told her. "It's important."

"You think he might know what's wrong with Uncle Igor?"

"That's right," I nodded. "He must know."

I looked him up in the book. Dr. Roger Kelring. I called his downtown office, not hoping for much of anything. Still, this gang seemed to work late. Hammond King was on the job, and Igor Petroff was a regular night-owl. Or was he? "They fly by night."

The phone gave off that irritating sound known as a busy signal. That was enough for me.

"Come on, Miss Colby," I said. "We're going over to Dr. Kelring's office."

"But you didn't talk to him," she objected.

"Busy signal," I explained. "On second thought, I'd just as soon not say anything to him in advance."

"What do you mean? Do you think he's mixed up in all this?"

"Definitely," I assured her. "I wouldn't be a bit surprised if your uncle was up there with him now."

Lorna put on her coat and we went downstairs. In the lobby, she halted indecisively.

"Wait a minute, Mr. Kirby. Aren't we going to report seeing Uncle Igor in my room? After all, if he's sick somebody should be looking after him. He may be—"

"Dangerous? Perhaps. But let's not start something we can't finish. It's my hunch that he's over at Dr. Kelring's office. Don't ask me why, but I've got reasons. Besides, you don't want to get mixed up in a lot of cross-questioning, do you?"

She agreed. I was relieved. What could I do if we called some Law? Tell them that a suspected vampire was running around attacking girls in hotel rooms?

Besides, I didn't think Igor Petroff was "running around." He might be flying around. Or he might be working according to a plan. Dr. Kelring would know the plan.

We took a cab to Kelring's office, in a building off Pershing Square.

"What's the doctor like?" I asked Lorna.

"He's a rich woman's doctor," she told me. "You know—smooth, quiet, genial. He's about fifty, I guess. Bald-headed, with a little goatee. I only saw him once, at Aunt Irene's, a few months before she died. He was pleasant, but I didn't like him."

Lorna's voice betrayed her inner tension. I understood. It's not every night that a

girl is attacked by a vampire, even if he's a member of the family.

Partly for that reason and partly for personal pleasure, I held her arm as we took the elevator up to Kelring's office. A light burned behind the outer door. I opened it and stepped in. I had no gun, but if there was anything doing, I counted on the surprise element.

There was one.

SEATED at the desk in the reception room was a man of about fifty; bald-headed, and wearing a small goatee. His hand rested on the telephone as though he were going to pick it up and make another call.

But Dr. Kelring would never make another call. He sat there staring off into space, and when I touched his shoulder his neck wobbled off at an angle so that his goatee almost touched the spot between his shoulder-blades. Roger Kelring was quite, was definitely, was unmistakably dead.

I was patting Lorna's shoulder and making with the reassurement when the phone rang. Its sharp note cut the air, and I jumped. For a moment I stared at Dr. Kelring, wondering why his dead hand didn't lift the receiver and hold it to his ear.

Then I got around the desk, fast, and pried his cold fingers from the receiver.

"Lorna," I said, "how did—he—talk?"

"You mean Dr. Kelring?" She shuddered.

"Yes."

"Oh, I don't remember. . . . Yes, I think I do. He had a soft voice. Very soft."

"Good."

I whipped out my handkerchief and covered the mouthpiece. Just a hunch.

"Hello," I said lifting the receiver.

"Hello. That you, Kelring?"

I jumped as I recognized the voice. Hammond King!

"What is it?" I said, softly.

"Kelring, I must talk to you." He sounded frightened. Too frightened to analyze my voice.

"Go ahead. What's on your mind?"

"Did you ever read 'The Fall of the House of Usher'?"

"What?"

"You know what I'm talking about, Kelring. She's alive out there. I know it!"

"Who's alive?"

"Mrs. Petroff. Don't stall me, Kelring. I'm desperate."

"What makes you think so, man?"

"It happened two months ago. I was out there at the house with Petroff, arguing about the will. You know he's been trying to get me to turn over the estate before the time stipulated. I won't bother with details, but I heard a noise. A woman's voice, coming from behind the wall. It came from the private staircase behind the bookshelves—the one leading down to the family burial vaults in the hillside."

"Get to the point, King," I said.

"He tried to hold me off, but I made him take me down there. I don't know how to tell you this—but beyond the iron grille entrance, in the vaults, I caught a glimpse of Irene Colby Petroff. Alive."

"But I pronounced her dead of heart failure," I said, remembering what I'd been told.

"She was alive, I tell you! She ran into one of the passages, but I recognized her face. I tried to get Petroff to open the grille and go in, but he dragged me back upstairs. Then he told me the story."

"What story?"

"You know, all right, Kelring. That's why I didn't call before. I wanted to investigate on my own. Now I need your help."

"Better tell me all you know, then."

"I know that she's a—vampire."

I held my breath. King didn't wait for any comment.

"Petroff broke down and confessed. Said he knew it and you knew it. She'd been mixed up in some kind of Black Magic cult in Europe when he met her. And when she died, she didn't really die. She lived on, after sundown, as a vampire."

"Preposterous!"

"I wasn't sure myself, then. I wanted to call in the police. But Petroff pleaded with me. Said he had the guard and the dogs and kept people away. He had her locked up down there, fed her raw liver. Because you were trying to work on a cure. He asked for a little more time. And he explained it all. Gave me books on demonology to read. I didn't know what to believe, but I promised to wait. Then, three nights ago, he called and told me that she had tried to attack him. He asked me to come out this afternoon and talk things over."

"I went out there about four today. Maybe I was a fool, but I took some garlic with me. The books say garlic wards them off. When I arrived, I found Petroff lying on the floor. There were two holes in his throat—the marks of a vampire's teeth. So he has become a vampire now!"

"I got frightened and ran. I knew he had sent for his niece, Lorna Colby. I wanted to talk to her before I did anything. Then, tonight, a young man called on me. Said he was from the newspapers. He knows something, too."

"Kelring, I've made up my mind to act. I won't call the police. I—I can't. They'd laugh at me. But there's a monster loose tonight, and I can't stand waiting any longer. I'm going out to the Petroff place now."

"Wait!" I said.

His voice was shrill as he replied. "Do you know what I've been doing, Kelring? I've been sitting here molding silver bullets. Silver bullets for my gun. And I'm leaving now. I'm going out there to get him!"

"Don't be a fool!" I yelled, in my natural voice.

But he had hung up.

"Come on," I snapped at Lorna. "I'll call

the police and report on Kelring now. But we're getting out before they come."

"Where are we going?"

"To Petroff's house," I answered.

She nodded. I moved around the table. As I did, I saw something on the floor. It was a spectacle-case. I picked it up, turned it over. It was an expensive case, with an engraved name. The silver signature read:

Hammond King.

CHAPTER IV

Vampire's Teeth

AS THE cab driver grumbled about the long haul, I told Lorna what I thought was wise.

I was too groggy to think clearly. Lenehan thought I was drunk, I'd jumped arrest, I'd eavesdropped, and impersonated, and messed up a murder. And it looked like an even busier day tomorrow unless I could straighten this tangle out tonight.

That's my only excuse, I guess. I was a punch-drunk fool to take Lorna to that house, with only a crazy hunch to guide us, and armed with nothing but my suspicions.

But I did it. We rolled up to the black, forbidding portals of the Petroff place. We walked up the porch of the Petroff mansion and the cab waited in the driveway. I didn't see Hammond King's car, and I was glad we had arrived first.

He was wrong, I thought. Petroff was not here. And if he wasn't, we could find that staircase, take a look into the vault, and see for ourselves whether Irene Colby Petroff walked or slept forever.

Never mind the details. The garlic odor choked us in the creaky hall. It flooded the parlor as I lit the lamp, tapped bookcases, and found the button that opened a section of the wall. Lorna shivered at my side. The setup looked like something out of "The Cat and the Canary."

I kept listening for sounds. All quiet on the Western Front. With the light streaming from the parlor behind us, we took the secret staircase in stride. Down below was another panel in the wall. I switched on the light and walked down a long corridor. It was damp. King had said the private vaults of the family were out under the hillside.

We rounded a turn and came to the iron grille barring the hall. A perpetual light burned behind it. I tried the door. It was open. It squeaked as I pushed.

The squeak was drowned in a scream.

I turned.

Something black scuttled around the corner of the passageway. Something swooped down on Lorna, engulfed her in a sable cloud. I saw glaring eyes, red lips—Igor Petroff was here!

I made a dive for him. Petroff didn't dodge. He stood there, and as I came on, his arm lashed out. The blow caught me off balance and as I wavered, his hand moved out. Something flashed down, and then I fell.

There was a blurred impression of movement, screaming, and scuffling. Petroff had dragged Lorna through the grille, down into the vaults.

I lurched to my feet as another figure raced around the bend. More blamed traffic down here, I thought, dazedly.

It was Hammond King.

He didn't see me. He stared, glassy-eyed, as he ran past into the gloom of the corridor beyond. He was carrying a gun. Silver bullets!

I dashed after him. As we took another flight of stairs, I gazed over his shoulder at the family vaults beyond.

Lorna stood in a corner, crouching against a wall. The cloaked figure of Igor Petroff glided towards her, and I thought of Dracula, and of childhood terrors, and of nightmares men still whisper about.

Hammond King didn't think. He began pumping shots from his gun, firing in maniac fury.

Petroff turned, across the room. And then, he smiled. He didn't fall down. He smiled. He smiled, and started to run toward Hammond King with his arms extended, and Hammond King gave a little choking gurgle and fell down.

I didn't fall. As Petroff advanced, I ran to meet him. This time I was not off-balance. I let him have one right on the point of his white chin. He grunted, but his arms swept up and then I felt the cold embrace as he clawed at me. I hammered into his ribs, but he was hard, rigid. Rigor mortis is like that, I thought madly.

He smelled of dampness and mold and ancient earth. His arms were strong and he was squeezing me. I dropped to the floor and he began to reach for my throat. He chuckled, then, deep in his throat; an animal growl. A growl of hunger, the growl of a carnivore that scents blood.

He had me by the neck, and I reached out with one hand and scrabbled frantically against the floor until I felt the cold steel of the gun Hammond King had dropped.

PETROFF wrenched my arm back, trying to tear the gun from my fingers. I wanted to fight him off, but his other hand was at my neck, squeezing. I felt myself falling back, and I pulled my arm free and brought the gun-butt up against his head, once, twice, three times.

Igor Petroff wobbled like a rundown mechanical doll and dropped with a dull thud.

I got up and slapped Lorna's face. She came out of her trance, crying. Then I went over to Hammond King and slapped him around. Just a one-man rescue squad.

"Go upstairs, you two," I said. "The cab-driver's waiting outside. Tell him to go into Centerville and bring back Sheriff Shea. I'll meet you in a moment."

They left.

I went through the vault until I came to what I wanted to find. When I was quite finished with my inspection I went back upstairs.

Lorna and Hammond King were waiting in the parlor. She had fixed her hair again, and he looked well enough to smoke a cigarette.

"The police should be here in five minutes," King said.

"Good."

"Perhaps I'd better look outside," he suggested. "I'm expecting Dr. Kelring."

"Kelring isn't coming," I said, gently. "He's dead."

"But I talked to him over the phone."

I told him who he'd talked to. And then I decided to tell him a few other things.

"You should have gone to the police the night you saw Mrs. Petroff here," I said. "Then all this wouldn't have happened."

"But I saw her. She was alive."

"Right. But she wasn't a vampire. Too bad you believed that crazy story Petroff concocted. When you stumbled onto her existence, he had to think of something and the vampire story just popped out. After you half-swallowed it, he planned the rest. He had to convince you completely, and he was good at planning."

"What do you mean?"

"It all started, I think, when Petroff and Dr. Kelring decided to fake Mrs. Petroff's death. They were in on it together, to split the inheritance. They didn't have the nerve to kill her outright but drugged her, held a private funeral, and faked the death certificate. Then Petroff kept her a prisoner down here in the vaults. That's why he had dogs and a guard. She was alive until about three days ago."

"How do you know?"

"I just found her body in the vault," I explained. "And I've seen her living quarters—a room beyond. She's dead now, all right, and I'd say she died of starvation."

"I don't understand," Lorna sighed.

"Simple. When her fake death was accepted, Petroff and Dr. Kelring were all set to divide the spoils. But there were no spoils—not for a year, according to the terms of her will. They hadn't counted on that. So Petroff was trying to get King, here, to advance money against the inheritance."

"King, being a smart attorney, would do no such thing. But after he saw Mrs. Petroff alive and heard this vampire line, he began to weaken. Petroff took advantage of it, showing him books on demonology, and telling wild stories about secret cults."

Hammond King nodded miserably. "He was wearing me down," he admitted. "But

I wouldn't release any money. I couldn't, legally."

I took over again. "Then, three days ago, Mrs. Petroff actually died. Perhaps he deliberately starved her, perhaps not. In any event, she was dead, and his extortion plot and fake death was now actually murder. He wanted that money at once, needed it desperately.

"So he phoned you, King, and asked you to come out today, planning to show himself lying on the floor as the victim of a vampire attack. He had it figured that you'd be too shocked to call the police at once. Then, after dark, he would call upon you as a supposed vampire, threaten you with his bite, and get you to advance personal funds against the estate."

KING was looking bewildered.

"But I'd never do that," he protested. "He must have been mad!"

"He was—and desperate, too." I grinned. "Here's where I come into the story. Dave Kirby, the Boy Reporter. I got here today just after you left in the afternoon. I blundered in before Petroff could escape, so he lay there on the floor, hoping to fool me. When I left for the sheriff, he took a powder.

"Now the jig was up, but Petroff decided to carry the plan through. If he worked fast, he might still succeed. He'd called Lorna, asked her to come to town. He had only one idea—to appear before her as a supposed vampire and thus further bolster his story when he saw King and demanded money. This he was doing as I arrived at Lorna's room. He fled, and undertook his next step in the plan—the murder of Dr. Kelring."

"But why would he murder Kelring?" King asked.

I shrugged. "There were several reasons. The first is the one that led me to the scene. You remember, I came out to the house for an interview on the Petroff estate art treasures, an interview Petroff had already refused to grant."

"Yes?"

"There was a reason for my coming and a reason for his refusal. You see, my editor had a tip that several valuable vases recognized as part of the Petroff collection had been offered for sale at private auction. Get it?

"Petroff was already raising money by il-

legally disposing of art treasures belonging to the estate. Kelring must have just discovered this and demanded his cut. Otherwise, he would squeal about the fake death certificate. So Petroff had to kill him. Just as an added touch, he left a little souvenir after strangling him in his office."

I handed King his spectacle case.

"You nearly had credit for that piece of work," I said. "I'm sure he would have threatened to turn you in had you refused him money when he demanded it this evening. So it's lucky I had you on the phone and can support an alibi."

King blinked.

"After killing Dr. Kelring he scooted out here to wait for you. He knew you'd be out to check up. He hadn't counted on Lorna and me arriving, but when we showed up first, he was ready. After that you dashed in, made your bang-bang with the silver bullets, and passed out. You aren't a good shot, King. Those bullets are in the walls, not in his body. But it wouldn't have mattered much. He wore a bullet-proof vest under the cloak. Felt it when I tackled him."

Lorna looked at me.

"You tackled him," she whispered. "That was wonderful. Even if he might be a vampire, you took the chance."

"But he wasn't a vampire. I knew that."

"Didn't you find him with holes in his throat?"

"Right. But he made them himself. Shallow cuts with a paper-knife, no doubt. You see, a vampire's bite will drain all blood. And there was no blood. I know something about superstitions myself, Lorna."

Sirens punctuated my sentence. The law was arriving in full force.

Suddenly I was very tired and very contented. Lenehan would get a story after all. And I'd get some sleep.

Lorna kissed me.

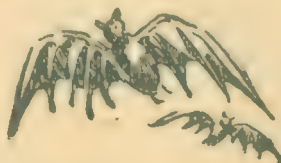
"What's that for?" I asked.

"For being brave. I don't care what you say, he might have been a vampire."

"Not a chance." I grinned. "I knew that from the beginning. When I looked at him on the floor this afternoon, his mouth was open. That was the tip-off."

"What do you mean?"

"He couldn't be a vampire because he couldn't bite anyone. After all, darling, who ever heard of a big, bad vampire with false teeth?"



MURDER AFTER LUNCH

By DONALD BAYNE HOBART

Private Sleuth Mugs Kelly Finds a Corpse in His Office!

WHEN you go out to lunch, and find a visitor waiting when you return to your office that's one thing, but if your guest turns out to be a cadaver, that's a horse off another merry-go-round. I should know, for I found I was playing host to a dead man.

"There's two guys waiting for you up in your office, Mr. Kelly," said the elevator operator as I got in the car. He is a guy named Joe but he isn't Spencer Tracy in the picture. "I wish I was a private detective like you are," he said.

"It's a greatly overestimated profession," I told him. "Besides those guys you mentioned are not waiting in my office. I locked the outer door when I went to lunch. I haven't a beautiful secretary to take care of the office when I'm away."

"Yeah, I know," said Joe sadly, as though he felt it was because of guys like me that an operator's life was not a happy one. He looked at me. "Still dames scare so easily."

I resented that. Even if I do have a face that Mother had to learn to trust, gals don't scream at sight of me. They just turn up their noses and walk faster. Maybe "Mugs" Kelly is tall, dark and repulsive, but I get along all right.

I got out of the elevator on the third floor. The door slid shut behind me and Joe went on up. There was no one in the third floor hall and I found the door of my office was still locked. I decided that the two guys Joe had mentioned must have got tired of waiting and left.

I unlocked the outer door of the office and went in. There was no one in the little reception room, but back in my private office I saw a heavy-set guy sitting in the chair behind my desk. His hat was pulled down over his face and he looked like he was taking a nap.

"Probably spends half his life in the subway," I decided. "And can sleep standing up."

I went into the private office, walked over to give the guy at the desk a shake to wake him up—and stopped short. The sight of the handle of the knife sticking out of his back made me very unhappy about the whole thing.

"You killed Beaumont Brownsville," said a deep voice behind me. "You murderer!"

"With a name like that he probably died of double syllabitis," I said, as I turned and found myself gazing at a thin man standing in the doorway. "And who are you?"

"I am Sherman Paris," announced the thin lug, as though he expected a fanfare at the mention of his name. "The Sherman Paris!"

I WAS thinking what a nice time the Homicide boys would have when they started investigating the murder. There wasn't any chance that this Beaumont Brownsville had died from natural causes.



MUGS KELLY

And the way Sherman Paris had arrived right on cue to accuse me of the crime struck me as much too pat.

"Just as a matter of curiosity," I said, "would you mind telling me why you think I killed the late Mr. Brownsville?"

"He told me that a detective named Kelly had been blackmailing him," said Paris. "Beau said he was going to see you at two this afternoon and settle the matter with you once and for all. He asked me to meet him here at your office at two-thirty. When I arrived a moment ago I found the outer door open—and you standing over the body."

Which was all very lovely since I had never heard of Beaumont Brownsville before, and I sure hadn't been blackmailing anyone. Sherman Paris was also another blank space in my life up to now. What worried me was that Paris sounded like he believed his own story.

That the corpse had been alone in my office with the outside door locked was another angle that interested me. Joe Dawson, the elevator operator, had said two men were looking for me. I wondered if those two lugs had been Brownsville and Paris. They might have entered my office with a pass-key. Then Paris had killed Brownsville and now was trying to get me all dusted off for the electric chair.

"This seems to be a matter for the police," I said, as I picked up the phone on my desk.

I called Homicide, reported the murder, gave the address, then hung up.

"They like to know about these things," I remarked.

Paris looked at me goggle-eyed. My phoning the police appeared to be something he hadn't expected. I moved around the desk and stepped on something soft. I saw it was a right-hand glove that was greasestained and had seen a lot of wear.

"So Brownsville claimed that a man named Kelly was blackmailing him," I said, as I put the glove in my pocket. "Did he ever show you any evidence of this blackmailing?"

"He had letters demanding various sums of money," said Paris. "I was his best friend and he showed them to me. You see I am rather well known as a graphologist, so I was interested in the letters."

"A handwriting expert would be," I said, and he looked disappointed when he found I knew what he was talking about. "Funny thing, I have noticed that some of my mail has been missing during the past month."

"I hardly see what that has to do with the murder of Brownsville," Paris said coldly.

I didn't pay any attention to him. I looked through the dead man's pockets and drew out three letters in envelopes that had been opened. They were blackmail threats all right—saying that the writer knew that Brownsville had served a short term in jail as a thief under another name. One letter demanded three hundred dollars, another five hundred, and the third two thousand. They were all signed "M. Kelly."

"Lovely," I said as I finished looking over the letters. "And all written in longhand, too. And me with such a nice typewriter." I looked hard at Paris. "As a handwriting expert, suppose you check my writing with these letters."

"Delighted," said Paris, and he looked like a wolf who was thinking about having rabbit for breakfast. "You write what I dictate."

He took one of the letters and read it off to me. I used my fountain pen and a piece of paper and wrote down just what he gave me. When I had finished he took the sheet and compared the writing with that of the blackmail notes.

"You are strong, aggressive, but very romantic," he said, then blinked. "Oh, I beg

pardon. Strange the writing is not at all alike. I—"

There were voices in the hall. The Homicide Squad had arrived. They came bursting into the office with Joe Dawson, the elevator operator, with them. The lieutenant in charge started asking questions. I told him about coming back from lunch and finding the body seated at my desk. I could see that even though my story was good the lieutenant didn't like it.

EDGING around close to the open door leading out into the corridor I reached down and pretended to pick up something.

"Here's your glove, Joe," I said. "The one you use to protect your hand when you open the inner gate of the elevator."

"Thanks," said Joe, taking the glove. "I must have dropped it."

"You did," I said. "When you murdered Brownsville."

"Can you prove that, Kelly?" Lieutenant Martin demanded as he whirled around, startled.

"Joe told me that two men were waiting for me in my office, when I came up in the car with him after lunch," I said. "He was trying to cast suspicion on someone else so that when I found the dead man I would look for the guy who had been with Brownsville. But I'll bet that Joe unlocked my office with a pass-key—he could get one easy enough—and killed this Brownsville."

"Why should Joe have killed him?" asked the lieutenant.

"Because Joe had been blackmailing Brownsville and using my name to do it," I said. "That's why some of my mail has been missing. Joe probably took some other letters every time one arrived from Brownsville, with the blackmail money in it."

Right then Joe Dawson proved that he was a sap. He tried to make a break and a couple of the Homicide men grabbed him and held him. If he had kept still he might have bluffed his way out of it. He admitted the whole thing when the police got him talking. And to think that lug wanted to be a detective!

Sherman Paris was all apologies for suspecting me, and offered to give me a complete report on my handwriting. I told him that would be all right with me. That stuff he had started to tell me about being romantic had sounded interesting.

"Maybe that will be more agreeable than the first time I saw Paris," I said. "For you sure had me wondering if I went around murdering guys in my sleep."

"Until the elevator operator gave you a lift," said Lieutenant Martin.

I shuddered. A guy from Homicide with a mind that could make puns like that was a crime.

"Don't Turn on the Lights —or You Die!"



THE VOICE from the shadows was deep and it was cold. The blinking sign across Broadway lighted again and Piers Hunt could see the man. He said softly, tentatively, "Fabian?"

"I am David. I am from Fabian." The mysterious intruder was dark against the room dark. "It is better we speak without lighting the room, Piers Hunt. Better we do not call attention to your room."

"Yes." Piers flung his papers on the bed, freeing his hands. But he had no intention of moving against a man with a gun. "Won't you sit down? What do you want?"

"Secretary Anstruther's dispatch case. And I won't leave here without it!"

Piers calmly lit a cigarette, hiding his excitement and fear. For days he had been haunted and hunted, stalked through the streets of the city because of the vital secrets of war and peace in his possession. How could he meet this new menace?

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Coming in the next issue—WATCH FOR IT!



Latham hadn't
found it hard to
kill the printer

THE KILLER WAS CAREFUL

By JOHN X. BROWN

Accountant Jerome Latham Tries to Balance Crime's Ledger!

JEROME LATHAM had none of the earmarks of a killer. It was getting so that it was hard for him to remember the fact himself. When he looked in the spotted mirror above the wash basin he saw the same familiar face. Surely a few new lines around his eyes and mouth and a sprinkling of gray hairs were not indications of a murderer. At the age of forty a man had a right to wrinkles and a touch of gray at the temples.

Yet Jerome Latham, small time accountant in the small city of Thebes, had killed as surely and as cold-bloodedly as any Dillinger or Vincent Coll. That he'd got away with it, and that five long years had passed since that rainy December night, couldn't rob him of the stigma of Cain.

It had happened when he was going over the accounts of Bill Dacey, the job printer with the little place on Walnut Street. Dacey always had an up-to-the-minute place with expensive machinery, yet his books always showed a loss. After a couple of years of it, Latham couldn't help wondering.

Dacey was always well-dressed, seemed to have plenty of money. But his shop never showed a profit. It was sheer luck when Latham found the lock to the basement unsprung one day and went downstairs for a look while the printer was out for lunch. The auditor was always a curious soul—a born snoop.

Latham could always smell a dollar, which was one of the things that made him a good auditor. He'd have been a C. P. A. and up in the money if the death of his parents hadn't forced him to leave school too early. And he had never quite forgiven the world for visiting such a bad break upon him.

But he'd found the money down there, stuffed away in a corner in an old suitcase. There was packet after packet of crisp new bills—tens, twenties, fifties, adding up to more than fifty thousand dollars. He hadn't totaled it then, of course.

A week later, he had gone after it. And it was just too bad that Dacey went after it the same night—Dacey's hard luck. Outweighing the printer by forty pounds, Latham hadn't found it hard to kill him. He'd had the factor of surprise on his side too.

Once in awhile after that, when he turned off the light, he had a vision of Dacey lying there on the basement floor, with his face purple in the circle of the flashlight and his tongue lolling from his mouth. But the vision didn't come often—and Latham could always get rid of it by thinking of those neat stacks of crisp bills now lying secure in a locked steel filing cabinet in the attic of the little house where he lived alone.

He'd been afraid—for awhile. Afraid he'd left some clue that the police would pick up, afraid that someone would know about the missing money. But the killing was blamed

on a passing vagrant who never was caught, and no heirs had come forward to claim the cash.

This proved to Latham that the money could not have been honestly come by. Where would an average sort of man like Dacey get fifty thousand dollars anyway—unless he stole it. In a roundabout way, this theory served to quiet whatever pangs of conscience might have assailed Latham.

Not that he had ever spent any of it. It wouldn't have been wise for him to flash a roll suddenly. People would have talked and grown curious and—well, it was wiser to wait. Besides, a lifetime of economical living habits could not be cast aside overnight, not by a methodical fellow like Jerome Latham.

Besides, mere ownership of such a sum of money was a responsibility in the auditor's scheme of things. Money, however, obtained, was something to be handled with care, to be watered carefully and made to flourish and grow. He was awaiting the right opportunity.

Investment in Thebes was out. Too many people knew too much about him. Therefore, it would have to be somewhere else. Being an auditor, Latham was not to be fooled by any fly-by-night investment scheme designed to draw suckers. Quietly, almost furtively, he had studied a lot of them since he'd killed Dacey.

He wasn't in a hurry. The mere knowledge that he had it stashed away gave him a sense of power that was satisfying in itself. A teetotaler, he never talked in his cups, and he had always been close-mouthed about his own affairs. No, Jerome Latham was one man who was going to make crime pay.

NOW, five years after the murder, he was ready to cash in. He had spotted the opportunity in the pages of a staid financial magazine of top-flight reputation. A fine manufacturing concern was on the verge of bankruptcy thanks to the improvidence of its late founder's son. The business itself was a staple, would, with new ownership and new money, be a gold mine.

A would-be buyer wanted a partner with cash. Tentatively, Latham had written a letter. And the result was that J. Sherman ("call me Jim") Tredennick met him in a nearby city to talk the proposition over. That was where Latham learned the details of the project.

It was pure gold as Tredennick put it to him. Latham was smart enough to recognize the born promoter in the man. He wore expensive clothes, smoked costly cigars and had an obvious taste for the finer things in life. But he quoted figures and offered statistics that backed up his glib explanation of the facts.

Latham, of course, was not to be stampeded into anything. He came back to Thebes and thought it over. He wrote con-

fidentially to various investigating agencies to check on the status of the company. And everything he received in return was solid support to Tredennick.

The man himself panned out better than Latham had dared hope, under the cold eye of private investigation. He was a promoter, yes—but he had the Midas touch. Any proposition he went into was almost a sure thing. His occasional losses were caused only by a tendency to overexpand. And Latham, by nature and long experience, could keep a tight rein on the man.

On their third meeting, just two days before, Latham turned over to him thirty-five thousand dollars in cash. In return, he received an impressive set of papers—a receipt, options, and other business devices. Within a week or so, he'd get a notice of transfer of stock. Then, all in good time, he would close up his business in Thebes and move away to take over his new position.

And he still had fifteen thousand plus the thousand or two in his savings account, to tide him over until the real money began to flow in!

He had just finished shaving, with these pleasurable thoughts in his head, when the doorbell rang. Wondering a little who would be calling on him so early in the morning, he went downstairs. Each time he put a foot down on the steps, he felt a tingle of anticipation through his whole body. Perhaps Tredennick had put the deal across earlier than either of them had expected.

A couple of grim-faced strangers came in when he opened the door. Before he could ask them their business, the first of them flashed identification papers which showed him to be a Federal investigator. Puzzled, Latham led them into his little sitting room and bade them sit down.

"I'm sorry to bother you like this, Mr. Latham," said the leader, "but it is for your own protection."

"For my protection?" said Latham, blinking behind his rimless glasses. "I'm afraid I don't understand."

"It's like this, Mr. Latham. We're on the trail of a man you've been seen talking business with in Johnson City. He's a big fellow, red-faced, with a fondness for expensive loud clothes, good liquor and cigars. His name is Weedon—Percy Weedon—and he's a very slick article."

"I don't know anybody of that name," said Latham. His heart had crashed against the soles of his shoes, but there was just a chance.

The Federal man got to his feet, and his colleague rose with him.

"You're lucky," said the investigator. "Of course, the description could fit a lot of men. This fellow is one of the ablest confidence men out of jail. Just now he's been trimming suckers impersonating a man named Tredennick. Tredennick is a reputable promoter who put us on his trail."

"Just a minute," Latham said.

The investigator, who had already started out the doorway, turned and looked back, one eyebrow raised. Latham started to speak, then remembered his lips were sealed. If they ever found the thirty-five thousand, he'd have to tell them how he got it, sooner or later.

"Nothing," he said. "Nothing at all. No, I haven't seen him."

The Federal man gave him a long searching look, then shrugged his shoulders as if to say, "It's your headache, Bub." He went on out, slamming the front door behind him.

For a long time, Jerome Latham sat there, his fingers braiding the fringed tassel on the arm of his chair. His face was as gray as the hair above his temples. His eyes were blank and glassy.

Finally he got slowly to his feet. Moving like a man in a trance, he went to the kitchen to heat up some coffee. There were routine jobs to be done, and if his dream of wealth, so dearly bought, was shattered, he still had fifteen thousand dollars.

He was thinking of how he could spend, say a third of it, on one big blowoff, having the rest for his old age. Thus it was a full second before he saw the man seated in the wooden chair by the kitchen table.

IT WAS Percy Weedon, the false J. Sherman ("call me Jim") Tredennick in the flesh. In his astonishment, Latham failed to notice the angry fire that burned in the swindler's eyes. The auditor stopped short and blinked in sheer surprise.

"Yes, it's me," said the swindler, and his voice was no longer dulcet. His suit needed a pressing badly, his face needed a shave.

"Thought you could get away with it, didn't you, you small time chiseler!"

"The Federal men just left," said Latham. His mind was beginning to work again, looking for a profit in this swift turn of fortune. "They told me about you. You can give me the money, and I'll get you away from them. Hand it over!"

"Here's your money!" said the swindler, and picking up a briefcase from the chair beside him, he hurled it against Latham's chest, staggering him. It fell open, spilling packets of neat green certificates all over the kitchen floor. "Here's your money and a little bonus from me. Don't you know I can't afford to let anyone get away with a thing like that?"

A revolver was in his hand, pointed at Latham's heart. The auditor's reaction, confronted by the gun, was one of incredulous surprise.

"I don't understand," he said. "I don't see why you—"

"As if you didn't know it was counterfeit, you crook!" said the swindler.

His gun roared loud in the kitchen, echoed through the house. But Latham never uttered a whisper of protest as the steel-jacketed slug smashed through his aorta.

Seconds later, one of the Federal investigators, left behind to tail the accountant because of his odd behavior when questioned about Weedon, crashed in and caught Weedon red-handed. It was an odd scene he found there—Latham dead on the floor surrounded by scattered packets of bills, the dishevelled killer standing above him. And the oddest feature was that Latham looked as if he were glad to die.

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(Adv.)

The gun in Jamison's hand was leveled dead center at my chest



THE SPELL OF DEATH

By A. BOYD CORRELL

Insurance Investigator Dick Ames Has a Full Night's Work Running Down a Killer—Despite the Dictionary's Help!

THE tub was full. I padded a towel for a head rest, slipped into the warm water, and stretched out for a good, relaxing soak with just my face sticking out. From that position I noticed the landlord hadn't fixed the crack that zig-zagged across the bathroom ceiling.

An earthquake, which the local papers out of consideration for the Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce reported as a "slight temblor," had darned near split the ceiling from wall to wall. It had happened a week

ago, when I'd first moved into the apartment.

The water felt good, especially to my stiff ankle which was the result of a slug from a blackmailer's gun. I had stopped it several years ago when I was on my own as a private sleuth, and since war had been declared I had cursed it daily. It kept

me out of uniform.

The day had been irritating. No activity, just a lot of talking, listening, and looking at bookkeeper's accounts. The Maxwell Loan and Finance Company of Hollywood had filed claim for a twelve-thousand-dollar shortage in their collection department.

My company, Shield Bond and Insurance, who bonded Maxwell's clerical help, had sent me over to investigate. Old Joshua Maxwell, president of the loan company, had turned me over to Cecil Jamison, head of his collection department.

Jamison, a straw-haired giant of a man had given me what information he could. He had an English accent, and clipped his speeches to the barest essentials—a habit he had probably acquired in dealing with delinquent borrowers. I had the names of all the men under him—collectors, bookkeepers and auditors—and planned on sticking my nose into their private lives next day.

In the bath I was almost dozing. I had reached that luxurious state between consciousness and unconsciousness, and the only thing that kept me from going to sleep was an annoying drip-drip in the tub.

Without opening my eyes I lifted a foot and tightened both the hot and cold water faucets with my toes. The drip-drip continued. I yawned, sat up and stretched, then let out a yell. My bath water had taken on a pinkish color, and from the crack in the ceiling a steady trickle of blood was dripping into it!

In forty-five seconds I was in some clothes and across the hall, beating at the door of the manager's apartment. I didn't wait for him to answer but slammed on in.

The manager's name was Thompson. He was a pudgy, bald-headed guy with moon eyes. I motioned him outside, so as not to upset his wife. I had glimpsed her through the kitchen door.

"Someone," I said, catching my breath, "is bleeding into my bath tub."

Thompson's moon eyes widened. He gawked and backed away, probably thinking I was mad. I grabbed his arm and explained more fully.

The manager blinked and his round face turned pale.

"Oh, lord!" he whispered, and waddled through the doorway, returning immediately with a key.

I followed him, and upstairs his hand was shaking so I had to unlock the door for him. I entered first.

The apartment was arranged slightly different from mine. The bedroom, which also served as a sitting room, was in the same position, but the bath was over my kitchen and the kitchen of this apartment was over my bath. In the kitchen was the body of a young man. His head rested against a water pipe under the sink. He looked as if he were sleeping. Without touching him I stooped by his side, then motioned to Thompson.

The fat manager came over in slow motion. I could see he was getting ill. I pointed.

Under the dead man's left ear his throat was slashed. The water pipe fitted badly, and the blood from the wound had flowed between the pipe and floor, down onto the crack in my bathroom ceiling.

Thompson made a subterranean noise, clapped his hand over his Cupid-bow mouth, and ran for the bath. I could hear him continue his noise with variations.

I looked closer at the corpse. There was a bruise on his head where it rested against the pipe. It could have been caused by hitting against it when he fell. By his right hand was a straight razor, open and bloody.

Thompson came out of the bathroom, looking pale and queasy. He walked on a bias, away from the body and into the sitting room. I followed him.

"What's his name?" I asked.

He swallowed with difficulty.

"Tom Harker," he answered. "He's lived here almost two years."

The name registered. "He works for Maxwell Loan Company?"

Harker was one of the names Jamison had mentioned in his office that afternoon.

Thompson bobbed his head. "Yes. This building is owned by the Maxwell company. They give special rates to their employees."

That explained the coincidence.

"Any other employees live here?" I asked.

"Kent Andrews," Thompson answered. "He and his wife have the apartment next to mine." He shot a glance toward the kitchen and I thought he was charting a return trip to the bath. "Imagine—cutting your own throat!" He made the return trip.

I cocked an eye at his retreating figure and suddenly wondered if he were putting on an act. Obviously it was a suicide, so why should Thompson go to the bother of calling my attention to it?

Or was it suicide? My detective instinct of never accepting the obvious asserted itself. The set-up was perfect. With his right hand Harker would slash under his left ear. The razor was beside him. There were no other signs of violence, except the bruise on his head.

Against that, statistics show that most suicides are committed in a bathroom. This was in a kitchen. A straight razor is seldom used by young men for shaving, although the growing shortage of safety blades due to the war was bringing back the old type razor. Of course, he could have bought it for the purpose of suicide.

Anyway, the cops had to be notified. There was a phone on a table by a typewriter, and I went over and picked up the receiver. It was then I saw the note.

Typewritten on a piece of smudged, purple-lined paper torn from a note-

book was a letter addressed to Joshua Maxwell. It read:

I have made up my mind to die rather than endure the hardship and dishonour of a long term in prison. By now your auditors have probably discovered the shortage of twelve thousand dollars, which I embezzled. I had no intention of stealing this amount. At first, I held out a small sum from my collections to bet with the bookies. I lost, and borrowed more. My bad luck continued and I grew frantic. I plunged until— Well, I'm paying off now. All I can say is that I am sorry.

It was signed in pencil, "Tom Harker."

I hoisted the eyebrows. The shortage had been discovered in the semi-yearly audit, which showed he had lost twelve grand in the short time of six months. And all with bookies, as the West Coast tracks are closed for the duration.

I dialed the Los Angeles police, and asked for Lieutenant Sweeny in Homicide.

"'Lo, Michael," I said when I got him. "This is Dick Ames."

I gave him the address, and told him what I had found. Sweeny said he would be over with a couple of his boys and I hung up. Thompson was reading the letter.

"This fellow, Kent Andrews, who has the apartment behind you," I asked. "Is he in now?"

Thompson said he thought he was.

I checked the table again, but found nothing but a package of typewriter paper and a couple of unpaid bills. We went downstairs to Andrews' apartment.

Kent Andrews and his wife were direct opposites in looks. He was a homely guy; sallow skin, and stringy, dirty-colored hair plastered down. His upper teeth bit out, and he had practically no chin. He looked about thirty.

Doris Andrews, his wife, was a honey. A figure that would start a riot on any beach. Her reddish-golden hair framed an oval face that sported the biggest pair of aqua-

marine eyes I had ever seen. Her lips were over-full, and suggested a permanent but very tantalizing pout. I'd seen her type in Sunset Strip cocktail bars.

I opened the conversation.

"Could you tell me what time Tom Harker came in from work?"

Andrews registered surprise and glanced at Thompson.

"Why, about five-fifteen. I came in the same time. He had lost his keys at the office and asked Thompson to let him into his apartment."

I looked at Thompson.

"Yes, of course," he stuttered. "I'd forgotten."

"He was all right when you left him?"

Thompson nodded vigorously.

"Yes, perfectly. I didn't go in—just opened the door and came straight downstairs."

"What's all this about?" demanded Andrews.

I passed up the question for a moment.

"Was Harker a friend of yours?" I asked.

He shot a look at his wife.

"Why, yes. We work in the same department. He's more a friend of my wife's, as they both come from the same town."

He added that last in an expressionless voice that could mean anything. I looked at the girl.

"Tom—Mr. Harker—has been kind enough to escort me to the theatre evenings," she said quickly. "My husband doesn't care about going out nights." She looked at Andrews defiantly, then swung back to me. "Why? What about him?"

Thompson spoke up quickly. "He's committed suicide."

Doris's hand flew to her mouth to stifle a scream. Andrews' eyes narrowed, but he showed no other signs of surprise.

I studied them a moment.

"Any idea why he would do it?" I asked.

The girl shook her head dumbly, but her husband said:

"Probably lost his shirt with the bookies."

"You knew he played the horses?"

Andrews' smile was almost a sneer.

"Everyone in the office knew it. All he talked about was horse-racing. He borrowed money from anybody sucker enough to loan it to him."

I thought that over. A man who could juggle his collections and embezzle twelve thousand dollars would hardly be borrowing change from his friends. There was a knock at the door, and Mrs. Thompson came in. She said Lieutenant Sweeny and two other policemen were in the hall and wanted to see me. I got up to go.

On the card table by the door was a batch of literature printed for the Maxwell Loan Company, stuff Andrews had brought home. A notebook lay alongside it. As I passed the table I flipped up the cover of the book. Several pages had been torn out, and the remaining pages were of the same kind of purple-lined paper the suicide note was written on.

As I started through the doorway Andrews spoke again.

"I just happened to remember. Harker said he won today, and—" He halted in mid-sentence, and I could see he was sorry he had spoken. He shrugged. "I must have been mistaken."

He followed Thompson and me as we took Lieutenant Sweeny and his two men upstairs.

In the hall the Homicide officer questioned us, then left us there while he checked the room. In about ten minutes he called us in.

"Plain case of suicide," he said. "Unless the medical examiner finds something I've missed." He was fingering the typewritten note. "I'd like to confirm this signature, however."

Andrews pushed forward. "I've got his signature on a check in my apartment. You can compare it."

He went down and returned shortly with the check.

"Here's his endorsement," he told the police.

Sweeny compared the two, which were identical. He nodded, and turned the check over. It was for one hundred dollars, made out to Harker, and signed by Andrews.

"You owed him money?"

Andrews shook his head. "No. That was a loan I made him on his car. It was hardly worth it, but his tires are good and mine are not."

Sweeny handed the check back, then turned to me.

"Did Shield handle his bond?"

I nodded. "Yeah. I'm working on the case. Looks like we're out twelve grand." I reached over and touched the note. "How about letting me have the letter to close the case? I'll have a photostat made in the morning for our records, and send you the original."

Sweeny said okay, and I walked downstairs with Andrews. The cops stayed to wait for the medical examiner.

I handed the letter to Andrews as we walked towards his apartment.

"Ever see paper like this?" I asked.

Andrews flushed and his voice was angry.

"Yes. It's like that in the note-book you fingered in my apartment. It's also like that in a thousand other note-books in the Maxwell office. The company issues them to all employees to use in inter-office correspondence and for figuring interest and so forth."

We had reached his apartment, and he slammed into it before I had time to ask any more questions.

I went into my own place and got Cecil Jamison on the phone.

"One of your collectors, Tom Harker, is dead," I told him.

I heard a slight gasp. "How did it happen?"

"The cops will give you a full report," I told him. "I've got his note, confessing to the embezzlement of the

twelve grand."

"Well, I suppose that settles it," Jamison said, "but I wish you'd caught him alive so he could untangle the books."

I agreed with him. "However," I said, "I'm not yet sold on it being a suicide. There's something funny about the note he left, and I want to look into it. If you'll cooperate with me and accept, apparently, the police report of it being a suicide, I'd appreciate it."

Jamison promised, and I hung up, put on pajamas, and climbed into bed. I wanted to do some thinking, and I always think better lying down.

I studied the suicide note. The paper was dirty and smudged, yet there had been plenty of clean type-writer paper on the table. The wording of the note suggested that a somewhat meticulous man had written it, yet he had used scrap paper.

I thought back to when I had mentioned to Sweeny that I was handling the case. Thompson had seemed unusually interested in what I was saying. Then, when I asked for the note, Andrews was interested. He had also become rattled when I asked about the paper. And what was it he had started to say about Harker having won?

I stuck the note under my pillow and turned off the light. Andrews and his wife had snapped at each other. Had Andrews been jealous of the dead man? His taking his wife out to the theatre? I dropped off to sleep, anticipating a busy day when morning came. . . .

It was around midnight when I jerked awake. The room was pitch-dark, and the window merely framed a square of blue-blackness. The door, I noticed, also showed a crack of blue-blackness, and I remembered I had not thrown the night latch. I lay perfectly still. There was absolute silence at first, then I began to feel rather than hear slight movement. Someone besides myself was

in the room.

My hand was snaking towards the pillow where I kept a .38 when the beam of a flash stabbed my face.

"Just keep still," a muffled voice said, "and you won't get hurt."

I tried to place the voice. It sounded vaguely familiar, yet its owner was trying to disguise it, probably by talking through a handkerchief.

"Okay," I said. "What is this, a heist?"

"When I said keep still I meant your lip too!" There was a snarl in the tone. "Where's the letter?"

My mind raced. So that was it. My suspicion that the suicide was a fake was bearing fruit. I thought fast.

"The bottom drawer of the dresser," I told him.

He would have to use his flash for a moment to check the drawer, and with half a chance I could rush him. He hesitated. I made a slight movement.

"I'll get it for you if you like."

"Another move like that and you'll get it—between the eyes!" he snarled.

The light wavered a little and I could hear him fumbling with the bottom drawer. I kept books, magazines and correspondence there and he would have a sweet time finding a particular letter in all that junk. The fact that what he wanted was under my pillow was not going to help him much. I heard him curse under his breath, then for a moment he swung his light from me to the drawer.

That was what I was waiting for. I shoved with my elbows and back and landed standing in the middle of the bed, then spring-boarded in a headlong dive for the dresser. I connected with him and we went down, the light skittering across the floor to smash out against the wall. I grabbed for his gun arm, and got it just as he fouled me with his knee.

I groaned and writhed but hung on

to the arm. A hamlike fist smashed into my face and the gun went off with a roar beside my ear. He twisted free and slammed for the door. There was a woman's scream, the sound of flesh smacking flesh, then a door banged. I got up painfully and snapped on the lights.

In the hall, just outside my door, a woman lay in a sprawled heap. I leaned over her and she moaned and moved her head. It was Doris Andrews. Her lower lip was split, and a dark bruise was already showing on her cheek. I picked her up and got her to a chair in my apartment, and doused her face with cold water. She opened her eyes.

"Just what were you doing outside my door?" I asked.

She put a trembling hand to her bruised lips.

"I—I was looking for my husband."

"At midnight? I thought he didn't go out evenings?"

She seemed flustered. "He doesn't, usually. But after he came downstairs with you he said he wanted to get some air. He said that seeing Tom Harker had upset him. I thought maybe he was talking with you."

Thompson came running in then, his galluses trailing under his bathrobe. I explained that a prowler had been in my room and that I had chased him out. He had smacked Doris when she happened to be in his way. I kept the suicide letter angle to myself.

The apartment manager wanted to call the cops but I told him nothing was missing and the publicity wouldn't be good for the building. I didn't want Sweeny messing around until I'd finished checking. If the lieutenant thought the suicide was faked he would take the letter back before I was through with it.

Doris went back to her room and Thompson to his. I dressed, stuck the note in my pocket, and went out. I checked the front door and found the night latch on. No one could have

entered without a key.

I started walking toward the laboratory and living quarters of J. W. Peabody. Peabody was a man who did things with cameras and lights that made forgery a poor paying business in Los Angeles. Shield and other bonding companies used him on cases of suspected forgery and alteration of signatures. He was a crabby old guy, and wouldn't appreciate being routed out of bed at one o'clock, but I wanted to check my suspicions.

The scientist's place was half-way between my apartment and Vine street. I had to buzz a good two minutes before he opened up. He recognized me and glowered.

"My hours, young man, are from ten to four—in *daylight*. If Shield can't get their work to me then, the devil with 'em."

He started to slam the door. I stuck my foot in the jamb.

"Wait a minute," I said. "Somebody's trying to knock me over for a letter I've got. I want you to look at it."

He grumbled, but I saw a flicker of interest in his eyes.

"All right, come in." He opened the door, then turned to wag a finger at me. "But remember, Shield's gets a bill for double my rate. Waking me up at one o'clock in the morning!" He snorted.

I gave him the letter and asked him to check it for erasures. He picked up a portable ultra-violet lamp, and switched off the lights. After a moment, peering over his shoulder I saw the letter throw off a slight glow. Peabody grunted and switched on the lights again.

"Looks like you might be right," he said. "Wait in the front room while I make some pictures."

I went into the sitting room and waited. I had seen him do his work before. Documents suspected of having been altered were flooded with ultra-violet rays and then photographed.

Practically all substances are fluorescent, which means that when they are subjected to ultra-violet rays they give off a radiance which can be photographed. Erased pencil markings still leave marks which respond to the rays. Either the graphite responds to the light or the pencil has worn the paper slightly thinner, and these thin lines have a lower fluorescence than the balance of the paper, and will show in a photograph.

At one-thirty he came to the door and motioned to me to come into the laboratory. He had rigged up a screen like that used in home movies. A projector threw a spot of light on it. He flipped off the lights and slipped a negative into the projector. On the screen appeared the suicide note, but also something more. Written in long hand, between and under the typewritten words, was a message. It read:

Kent: I hit a winner today and have five hundred waiting for me at the bookies in Beverly Hills. As you are holding my car, will you please call at this address and collect it for me? Take out the one hundred I owe you. The enclosed note will get you the money as I've phoned the bookie.

The signature, "Tom Harker," served for both the suicide note and the inter-office communication.

I jumped up and headed for the phone before Peabody had a chance to switch on the lights. Things were shaping. The "suicide" was definitely murder! No man in Harker's position would kill himself when he stood to collect five hundred dollars the following day. And Kent Andrews was doing the collecting!

I dialed Jamison's phone, and at last got the head of the collection department to answer.

"Does Andrews have a key to the office?" I asked him.

He said yes, all the employees in his department had keys. They frequently worked at night.

I told him to meet me at Hollywood

and Vine as soon as he could get there. He lived near the office, which was on Vine.

At Hollywood's most famous corner, Jamison was waiting for me. It was after two and the streets were almost deserted. One lone car, parked in front of the building which housed the Maxwell offices, stood in the shadows of the empty boulevard.

As the collection manager and I walked toward the building, I explained that I wanted to see the personnel records of his employees. I wanted to know where they had worked before, what training they had had, their education, and other information a company usually gets when a person applies for a job.

Jamison, sleepy-eyed, seemed amused at my demands, but took me to the fourth floor of the building. The elevator was not running and we walked the three flights of stairs. Jamison opened the doors to the offices, reached in, and switched on the lights.

We were in an ante-room. A door in the center was lettered "Collections," and I headed for it, the Maxwell executive close on my heels. I felt around, found the switch, and clicked on the lights.

In the center of the room, surrounded by desks, was the body of Kent Andrews! A pool of blood had spilled from under his outflung left arm and was congealing on the floor.

Jamison stood frozen in the doorway, his hand squeezing the knob, his face a mask of horror. I knelt by the body, which was face down. A small hole, the size of a pencil, was in the back of his coat. He had been shot through the heart from the back.

I got up slowly and turned to the shaking Jamison.

"He's dead. There's nothing we can do for him. I'd like to see those personnel records."

The collection manager ran a loose hand across his face. "Good lord! The man's been murdered and you

ask to see records. I'm calling the police." He reached for the nearest phone on one of the desks.

I grabbed his arm and pulled him into a chair. "Listen," I snapped. "My company stands to lose twelve grand if I don't clear up that phony suicide of Harker's. I'll call the cops after I've seen the records, and I think I'll name the murderer."

Jamison pulled himself together. He clipped a "Veddy well," and nodded toward a door at the left.

"That's my office and you'll find the files there. However, I hold you entirely responsible."

I didn't bother to reply, going straight into his office and turning on the lights. It was an elaborately furnished private office, as befitted Jamison's obvious taste. There was a fireplace—English style. A file case near the door was labeled "Personal Records," and I took the long drawer to the desk and started through the cards. Within twenty minutes I had thumbed through them all, searching for what I wanted.

I slipped the drawer back into the cabinet, heeled the door shut and picked up the phone. I dialed Joshua Maxwell's residence.

A sleepy-voiced butler answered and I spent sixty seconds convincing him that the call was urgent enough to rouse Mr. Maxwell. I heard the butler ring an extension, and when the loan company owner answered, there was a click as the servant hung up. However, another click told me the line was opened again.

"This is the investigator for Shield Bond, Mr. Maxwell," I said. "One of your collectors is dead. He left a suicide note, confessing the embezzlement of the twelve thousand dollars."

Maxwell's voice was hoarse with sleep.

"What the devil!" he rasped. "Calling me at three in the morning! My bond insurance is paid up and your company makes good the loss. Unless you've a good excuse for this idiotic

call I'll see that Shield gets a report on you that won't get you a raise."

I grinned into the phone. "I've got a good excuse, Mr. Maxwell," I said. "Here it is: Shield doesn't pay off, and you are stuck twelve grand."

The yell he threw into the phone suggested his blood pressure was hitting a new high.

"What the devil are you talking about?" he roared.

I waited a moment for his sputtering to quiet down.

"Shield," I said, "only bonds your clerks and collectors. It doesn't bond you nor your executives. I've definite proof that the thief, and murderer of Tom Harker, was not bonded by my company."

I cradled the phone, then dialed Los Angeles Police Headquarters. I had just reached Lieutenant Sweeny when the office door opened and Cecil Jamison came in. I put the phone down. Jamison had a gun in his hand. It was aimed dead center of my chest!

I looked up at him.

"You heard my conversation, Mr. Jamison?"

He nodded, his mouth drawn down in a tight lipped snarl.

"Yes, I heard it. Simply by picking up the phone in the outer office." His giant form towered over me and the desk. "You want to be more explicit?"

I had dropped into a chair, and my palms felt wet against its arms. My hands seemed miles away from the gun in my shoulder holster. I took a deep breath.

"Yes, I'd like to review the case—for your final okay."

Jamison smiled and his voice was heavy with sarcasm.

"Go right ahead, Mr. Ames. The final applies to you. It'll be interesting to know how you found out, and won't alter the position of your body alongside Kent Andrews' in the other room. Of course, you know, you and he killed each other. This gun will be found in his hand."

[Turn page]

Today's Thinkers
will become
Tomorrow's Leaders



TODAY is yesterday's tomorrow. Has it added anything to your life? Have you moved forward in thought as well as in time? Those who wait for today's events to give them the cue as to what to do, will find themselves lagging behind. The *present* is only a pedestal for progressive men and women to stand upon to *see beyond*, to look ahead to the great tomorrow. All about you are only the evidences of what *has been* done. They are now history—of the past. Can you visualize the tomorrow, next week or a year from now? If you cannot, you are a slave of the present, and marked for a life of uneventful monotonous routine.

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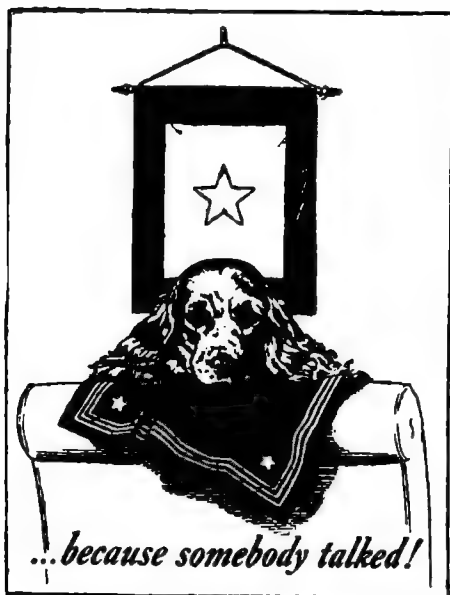
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His talking as though I were already dead sent a chill crawling along the nape of my neck. I slid to the edge of the chair.

"Andrews," I said, "died because he was crooked. Harker won five hundred dollars, and asked him to pick it up for him. When Andrews found that Harker was dead he decided to collect and keep the money. However, he couldn't find the note Harker had written him, and when he saw the suicide letter, he suspected it was the note, with everything erased except the signature."

Jamison nodded. "Go on. This is quite interesting."

I watched the gun, which did not waver.

"Andrews came back to the office to see if he had left the note on his desk. You discovered him here and shot him."

Jamison's face wore a sadistic grin.

"So that's what he was hunting. I saw him after I failed to get that suicide note from you—followed him back here. He was searching my desk... Yes, I shot him. I thought he had found evidence against me." I could see his trigger-finger whiten. "Now, if you'll explain why you suspected me?"

"You," I said, "picked up the note from Andrews' desk, erased the original message and typed in the confession, using the signature. You knew Harker played the horses, and would be a logical suspect. He happened to leave his keys at the office, and you found them."

"You followed him home, murdered him, and returned to your apartment. When I called you, telling you I was suspicious of the note, you immediately wanted to get it back. You used the keys again, entering my apartment, but, unfortunately, didn't get the note."

Jamison's gun moved an inch closer.

"Unfortunate for you," he said.

I shook my head. "No. Unfortunate for you. You practically

signed your own name when you typed that note. I confirmed it when I checked the personnel records. The previous employment and schooling of all of Maxwell's employees is listed on those cards. Yours, however, is the only one which shows a British education. The spelling in the suicide note was a dead giveaway, you with your British accent. You spelt dishonor with a *u*. D-i-s-h-o-n-o-u-r. Only persons educated in Britain or British dominion schools are taught to spell such words that way."

Far off a siren wailed. Jamison's face, for a moment, blanched. His eyes shot to the door, then back to me. With difficulty I kept my voice clear.

"Am I right, Mr. Jamison? You did kill Harker?"

Jamison's voice crackled from lips skinned back from white teeth.

"Yes, blast you! I killed Harker and Andrews, but you'll never live to tell it."

His gun roared as I skidded the swivel chair from under me and slammed to the floor. I dived under the desk and grabbed his legs as more slugs tore through the wooden top.

(Concluded on page 81)

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Dream of the Strangler

SOME years ago, when a brutal killer was brought to justice for strangling a young woman, the newspapers praised the work of the detective who brought about the arrest of the murderer. But they never revealed the strange hunch that led the detective to suspect the killer.

The detective in question has agreed to tell this secret provided his name is not mentioned. He claims it was all the result of a strange dream.

Shortly after the woman was found strangled, and there were no clues, the detective had a vivid dream. It worried him, and finally he consulted a psychiatrist. The detective told the physician he had dreamed of the dead woman, and in back of her had stood a vague huge-faced monster of a man who held a peculiar saddle in his hands.

After considerable questioning, the doctor decided the object in the dream was a Turkish saddle. He smiled and said: "You know, there is a part of the anatomy called the Turkish saddle, or in medical terms 'sella-turcica.' This contains the pituitary gland." And then the doctor added: "This gland concerns a disease known as acromegaly which causes unnatural growth of the face and hands . . . very strange indeed."

The detective then had a hunch.

"Doc," he said, "do you know of any man in this town suffering from acromegaly?"

The doctor did not. But the detective, in following his hunch, checked up every hos-

pital in the city. One man suffering from acromegaly was discovered—a monster of a human, and the detective shadowed him for days. Finally, when the man was caught molesting a young girl, the detective arrested him—and under questioning the culprit broke down and confessed the strangling. He was consequently convicted.

At the doctor's request, the fantastic dream was not publicized in connection with the notorious case.

The Phantom Persian Cat

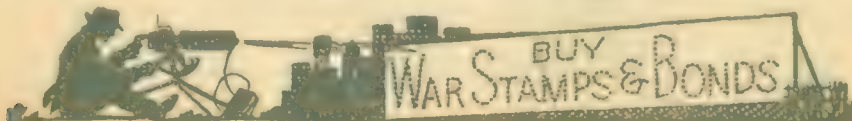
BILLY ALLEN, formerly of the Ziegfeld Follies, had a great affection for her pet Persian cat.

For fifteen years this beautiful feline was Miss Allen's constant companion. Regularly, just before dawn, the cat would jump on Miss Allen's bed and snuggle close to its mistress in purring contentment.

One day, while Miss Allen was visiting her sister in Texas, the cat, which went along with her on all journeys, became ill. Miss Allen was called to New York on business for a few days, so she left her cat with the sister.

Several nights later, Miss Allen was asleep in her New York hotel, when suddenly something jumped on her bed. Half asleep, Miss Allen believed it to be her cat, and reached down to pet the animal. It responded as it always had done.

Then, regaining her wits, Miss Allen remembered she had left the cat in Texas. So



she leaped out of bed and turned on the light. There was no animal in the room. It was four o'clock.

Believing it to be merely a realistic dream, Miss Allen went back to sleep only to be awakened some time later by a telephone call from her sister. The Persian cat had passed away at the very moment of the strange visitation in the New York hotel.

Brain of Death

SOME years ago, Professor Cazzamali of the University of Milan proved that a person's subconscious mind, when emotionalized, can emanate "brain-waves" which can be recorded on a short-wave receiver adjusted to register waves from one to ten meters in length. Conscious thoughts under normal conditions could not be detected.

Not so long ago, a well known scientist associated with an eastern police department was conducting experiments similar to those of Professor Cazzamali. His hope was to use hypnotism as an aid in criminology. He had been successful in getting a clue to a bank robbery from a hypnotized subject.

His test this day concerned a young woman clerk who had consented to be put under hypnosis to see if she could reveal some clue in connection with a murder case. While hypnotized she insisted upon carrying on a conversation with some invisible guest whom she called "Uncle Charles."

This prevented her from being of use in the particular case the doctor was interested in. Getting nowhere, he brought her out of her trance. [Turn page]

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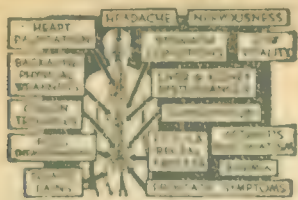
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When she was fully conscious, the doctor asked her: "Who is Uncle Charles?"

"Why, he is my favorite Uncle," said the girl. "He lives only ten miles from here."

She had no recollection of anything she had said while hypnotized.

Interested in why the uncle's personality would make itself felt for no apparent reason, the doctor suggested that the young lady telephone her uncle to see if there was something he wanted to tell her.

The girl telephoned her uncle. After a long wait, the connection was made. Her aunt answered the call. The girl was shocked when her aunt informed her that her uncle had died of heart failure early that very morning.

Had the spirit of the dead uncle come to visit the subconscious mind of his loving niece? Who knows? The subconscious might be the medium of psychic contact, as many people believe!

The Ghost Dirigible

HOWARD GORDON, an American soldier has reported this story from Italy. He claims that on the afternoon of last December 21st, he and several other soldiers were standing on the shore of the Mediterranean near Algiers.

Suddenly one of the men pointed to something in the sky.

"Look," he said, "a big blimp—what a target that would be for a Nazi plane . . . and it is falling into the sea!"

Gordon and the others looked up to where the soldier was pointing, but they saw nothing but a cloud.

"What's the matter with you, G. I.?" they said. "Have you been drinking wine or cognac?"

Then the soldier blinked and acted sheepish.

"Honest, fellows," he said, "I did see a blimp—but it's gone now. I even saw a name on it—the first three letters looked like Dix." Gordon ridiculed the soldier.

"Maybe you are psychic—were there any angels on it? Angels from Dixie."

But later, back in their barracks, one of his friends said:

"You shouldn't have said that to him, Gordon. You've made him scared that he's going to die—for many men believe that they see visions like that when their number is about up."

Gordon was sorry, but soon forgot it, until, several days later, the soldier who had seen the vision was killed. Then the other buddies recalled the strange vision and mentioned it to a group of men. One of the

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listeners was a French interpreter who asked Gordon to give him the details.

Gordon explained, and when he mentioned the three letters "Dix," the Frenchman gasped. He rushed to headquarters to get a book. Soon he came back, pale.

"Regardez," he exclaimed, "It was December 21, 1923, that a French dirigible rose from Algeria for the last time and headed out to sea. It was never seen again. Its name was Dixmude."

Inherited Memory

JOHAN MOBULIS is a farmer in northern New Jersey. Last February, on his fortieth birthday, his wife baked a large cake for him. He ate so much, that, after dinner, he decided to take a nap on the sofa. His wife was in the kitchen.

He was apparently sleeping soundly. Then suddenly he jumped up and ran out the front door. His wife didn't know what had happened as she saw him rush down the lane, then up the main road around a bend.

Alarmed, she followed him and finally caught up with him as he was standing in the middle of the road, dazed and rubbing his eyes.

"What happened, John?" she asked.

He shook his head.

"I don't know, Martha," he said, "I must have been dreaming, but I swear I heard a shot and some one calling for help. When I reached the road I saw a carriage right about here. There were two large black horses hitched to it, and two men were in it. One man staggered out of the carriage holding his shoulder and then fell down in the road right in this spot. I distinctly heard him say he had been shot. The other man saw me coming and ran into the woods over there. But when I got here, nothing was here at all."

His wife smiled. "You dreamed it. I told you not to eat so much cake."

They walked back to the house, joking about the matter. John's old mother was upstairs in bed. She had been ill, so she called down and asked what was the matter. They went up and told her.

But the mother didn't laugh. She turned pale.

"Describe everything you saw, John," she asked.

She listened intently as he did so.

"Son," she said, "you saw exactly what I saw happen just forty years ago—just a few days before you were born. It was the murder of Mr. Williams, who was shot by that man who was riding with him. He was convicted and sent to prison for life. I remember how afraid I was that the terrible shock I had would mark you in some way. You either inherited that memory from me, or else you saw a ghost."

Questions and Answers

Dear Chakra: Can you tell me the name and address of the so-called "Prophet of the Andes" who has such an excellent record of predictions and who predicted the present war to the day and who says it will end in 1945?—*Jeb Nobbera.* [Turn page]

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Dear Mr. Nebbera: He is called John Wierlo who can be reached at Quito, Ecuador.

Dear Chakra: Can you tell me where the Castle is situated in which the word "death" can not be spoken without causing death?—*Grace Bevers.*

Dear Miss Bevers: In Argourges, France. "The Castle of Black Death." Natives consider it haunted.

Dear Chakra: I once heard William Seabrook lecture on a cave called "The Devil's Throat," from which no one returns. Where is that?—*Bill Goodman.*

Dear Mr. Goodman: In Mexico, near Taxco, not very far from Mexico City. It is really a pit which holds a strange attraction for suicides. It is piled with bones.

Dear Chakra: I have heard that a certain lake in America predicts the end of every war, for in such years, the fish in that lake disappear. Where is that lake and have the fish disappeared this year?—*Howard Feltner.*

Dear Mr. Feltner: It is supposed to be Lake Michigan where the smelt last disappeared in 1918—and have repeated the vanishing act in 1944.

Dear Chakra: Have so-called poltergeists, the strange forces in haunted houses, ever caused physical harm?—*Kelly Marks.*

Dear Mr. Marks: There are many reports. One of the persons said to be badly scratched by them was Jacqueline Thomas. And recently members of the Hillel family at Eastern Passage, Nova Scotia, are said to have suffered bruises and broken bones.

—CHAKRA.

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THE SPELL OF DEATH

(Concluded from page 75)

I felt a hot stab of pain in my bad ankle as I managed to topple Jamison to the floor.

This time I fouled him—hard! His scream synchronized with the siren which was now below on Vine street. I smashed a right to his face and heard his nose snap. He swung a wide haymaker at me with the gun palmed, but I rolled to the side, bringing a knee up into his chin. His head snapped back, cracking against the floor, and he lay still. I pulled up on my good leg and reached for the phone which had been lying on the desk.

"You still there, Sweeny?" I asked.

"Sure!" he shouted. "With three witnesses taking down every word that killer said. There should be a radio cruiser there soon. I sent out a call some time ago."

I told him it was already downstairs. Suddenly I felt sick and dropped the base of the phone. I looked down at my game ankle. Blood was spurting from it. I had collected another slug.

I heard Sweeny shouting in the phone and I answered.

"Hey, Ames, are you all right?" he asked.

"Yeah," I said, sinking down on the floor with my back to the desk. "I'm okay. But if this ankle continues to collect lead every time I go out on a job, it'll be put on the priority list, and I'll only be able to work on Government cases."

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